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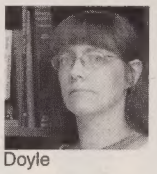
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Fitch

JADA FITCH, originally from Sebago, Maine, graduated from the Maine College of Art with a bachelor's degree in illustration in 2006 at the age of 22. Her favorite subject matter is sea life, animals, and fantasy-based art. She enjoys researching subject matter before starting a piece and spends a lot of time watching nature shows. Recently she moved to the Los Angeles area in search of more illustration opportunities, and is very much enjoying the new and different surroundings of the other side of the country.

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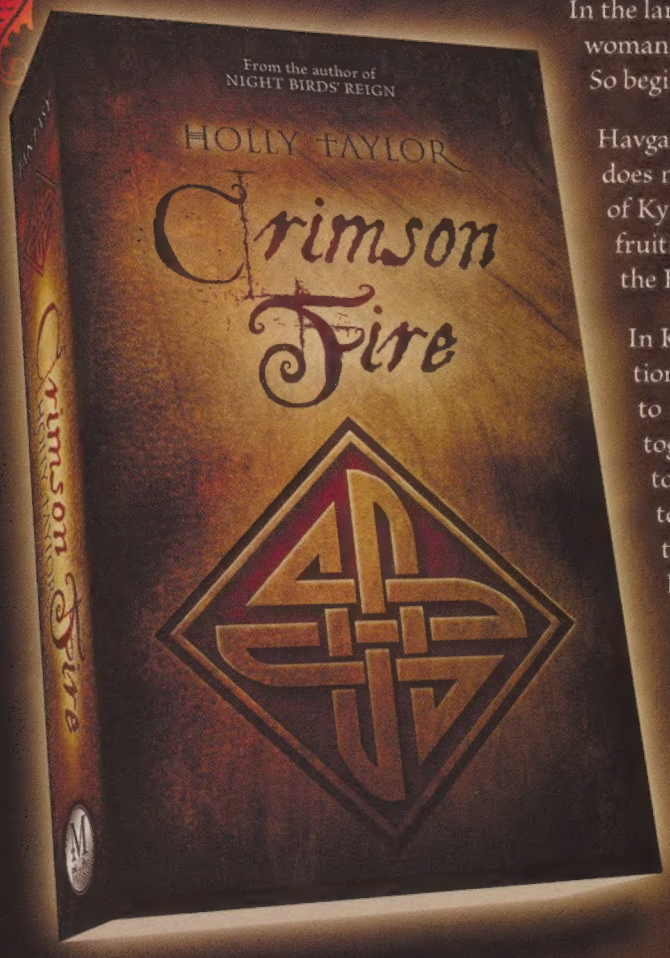

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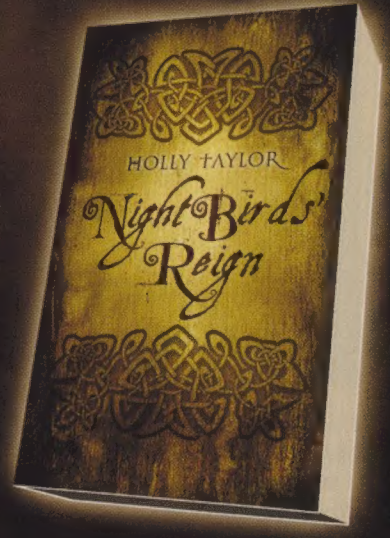

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By Resa Nelson

Frank Miller's dark hero King Leonidas battles the Persians in *300.*

King Leonidas

You may not know his name, but you know Gerard Butler. He was the heart-stealing stranger in *Dear Frankie,* the title character in *Phantom of the Opera,* and Attila the Hun on TV. Like Russell Crowe before he starred in *Gladiator,* Butler is considered to be on the verge of breaking out and gaining recognition as one of today's best leading men.

Hailing from Scotland, Butler has a charming brogue and a warm and engaging manner. On a movie set in Montreal, he was clearly frustrated while filming a scene in which Butler and another actor took a dive and landed on a 10-inch-thick gymnastics mat. Something wasn't quite right, and they shot the short scene over and over again. Finally, Butler admitted he was afraid of falling, even though it was a short fall onto a thick mat. Maybe it was just a joke, but there was a tremor in his voice. After a few more takes, he got it right.

It's ironic. In *300* (a new Warner Brothers movie based on Frank Miller's graphic novel, due in theaters on March 9), Butler plays King Leonidas, the ancient Greek leader of the Spartans, arguably one of the most courageous and fierce warriors in history. According to legend, when King Xerxes of Persia led a massive army to attack Greece in 480 BC—some say he had hundreds of thousands of soldiers, while others claims it was millions—Leonidas and 300 Spartans came up with a clever strategy to hold the invaders at bay for three days, killing many of the Persians in the process. Many believe this act paved the way for democracy, because the Spartans were fighting to protect a new-fangled idea of freedom for all people.

300 photos courtesy of Warner Bros.

Frank Miller's stylized history story becomes a fantasy feature film whose action is viewed through the eyes of Dilios, a Spartan (above).

"It's a character that I believed and understood and loved from the second I read him," Butler says about King Leonidas. "When it's like that, a lot of the feeling is an instant empathy and from then on it becomes very instinctive. I spent 24 hours a day thinking about my character. I don't think I've ever played anybody quite as forceful and downright masculine and relentless and ruthless as Leonidas. There's just something that's so tough and hard about this guy. That's what got me about the whole feel of the story. After the conversation with Zack and seeing the way they were going to make this movie, I thought, 'Wow. It's not going to be like anything I've seen.'"

Butler's talking about director Zack Snyder (*Dawn of the Dead*), who decided to stay true to Miller's

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WINTER:
THE OTHER SEASON FOR HORROR

Other than Halloween, Hollywood's favorite time of the year for horror films is the dead of winter. Watch for three new horror films to open in theaters soon.

The Messengers (opening on February 2 from Sony Pictures Entertainment) is a ghost story that blends Asian sensibilities with American landscape. The story is about a Chicago family that moves out to a farm in an effort to change their lives. Roy (played by Dylan McDermott of TV's *The Practice*) and his wife Denise (played by Penelope Ann Miller of TV's *Vanished*) make the move as a last-ditch effort. Their teenage daughter, Jess (played by Kristen Stewart of *Zathura* and *The Panic Room*), has landed in nothing but trouble back in the Chicago. Roy and Denise hope that farm life will make Jess forget about her bad school and bad friends. It's a fresh start, and they have high hopes.

Premonition: Photos © TriStar Pictures, Inc. All rights reserved.

Once the family finds themselves surrounded by crops instead of urban sprawl, Jess begins to notice strange things that make her think the farmhouse is haunted. At first she's not sure if what she's seeing is real or if she's just imagining things. But eventually she discovers that her baby brother—who's too young to talk—is seeing the same strange things. But Jess has one problem: her past.

"You have this girl who's betrayed her family's trust over and over again," says screenwriter Mark Wheaton (*The Messengers* is his first feature film). "Now it's the boy who cried wolf. Now something serious is going on, and no one believes her. They just can't. Through a confluence of events, time and time again, it looks like she's trying to get attention. They know she hates moving to the middle of nowhere. They know she hates being away from her friends. So as more and more of this happens, the onus is on her to save her family."

Initially disconnected from her family, the haunting makes Jess realize that she must protect her baby brother. In time, her mother begins to believe there may be some truth to what Jess has been telling her.

"In order for them to survive, this very disjointed family has to come back together," Wheaton says, "otherwise they're doomed. So it's about bringing this family together in order to deal with this crisis."

The Messengers comes from Ghost House, Sam Raimi's production company, which specializes in horror movies. "Honestly, that's something Raimi is a big proponent of," Wheaton says about the movie's focus. "He was always going back to the family. That was his entry point into the story, and during the writing that was something he pushed a great deal: it's about a family in crisis. He really liked that aspect of it."

Raimi created a unique Asian/American fusion by hiring Wheaton along with directors Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, brothers who are best known for movies they've made in Hong Kong.

"It's a lot of fun to work with them," Wheaton says about the Pang brothers. "The movie has such a traditional location. It's the American Midwest. It's the heartland. It's rural communities. I come from a small town in Texas, so I knew that world really well. They, coming from Thailand, came at it from a really different perspective. They were looking at what are very traditional scenes to the American eye that we've seen in a million movies, television programs, and paintings. It was neat to get a foreign perspective on what could have been a very traditional American horror film.

The Messengers: Photos © 2006 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All rights reserved.

"I really like haunted house movies. With horror movies, location is a very interesting thing. One of the things that I liked when growing up was reading traditional American authors like Lovecraft—it's not this European gothic tradition, where it's in the Carpathian Mountains in Dracula or Frankenstein's monster in a castle or the moors with the Wolfman. You can have somebody walk into a field and the field swallows them up. Lovecraft wrote a lot about the fear of the everyday, not some distant xenophobic thing like Dracula, but just things in your neighborhood, things in the next town over. And it's very interesting to work on a movie that takes a very American approach to location. You can't get more tuned in to Americana than a family farm in the middle of a beautiful sunny field. A lot of the scares take place in broad daylight. It's a very typical American setting. It's neat to take something so traditional and make it scary."

Although Wheaton originally set *The Messengers* in Texas, when a decision was made to shoot in Canada, he quickly changed the names of the towns to reflect North Dakota (the filmmakers believed audiences would accept the Canadian landscape as North Dakota). Nevertheless, the story stands intact. And what's likely to make *The Messengers* more interesting than the run-of-the-mill horror movie is the influence of stylish Asian ghost stories like *Ringu* and *Ju On* (remade in Hollywood as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*).

"It's kind of a hybrid," Wheaton says about the Pang Brothers' interpretation of his script. "It comes out of their sensibilities of Asian horror filmmaking where ghosts just exist. In America, people believe in ghosts: in a certain house there are ghosts, or if somebody's been wronged there's a ghost. It was very much a part of their life that ghosts were around us at all times. So they bring a lot of that idea that it's not specific. Ghosts are everywhere. They brought that into the storytelling of *The Messengers*."

Premonition is a different kind of supernatural movie due in theaters on March 16 (Sony Pictures Entertainment). Sandra Bullock (*Crash, While You Were Sleeping*) stars as Linda, a car salesman's wife who stays at home to raise their two young daughters. The problem is that Linda has let herself slip into a deep rut. Mindlessly, she wakes up, takes care of her house and the kids, and goes to bed at night. Everything is routine and nothing ever changes.

The Reaping: Photos courtesy of Warner Bros.

"Her life has become a wash of gray," says screenwriter Bill Kelly (*Blast From the Past*). "Every day has essentially become the same day to her. The story starts on a Thursday. The idea is that you wake up and it's Tuesday or you wake up and it's Friday, and you don't have any sense of all the Tuesdays or Fridays or Wednesdays or anything that preceded them. Her husband is away on an overnight trip. She takes her girls to school. She does the laundry. She has little chores."

Linda's world falls apart when her husband dies in a car crash. "She has to tell the kids and her mom comes over and she calls her best friend," Kelly says. "It's the idea that suddenly her whole life has changed. Now she's really conscious of looking at things differently because she's a widow. She falls asleep on the couch with a picture of her husband."

But when she wakes up the next morning, she's not on the couch. She's back in bed. She soon finds her husband is alive and watching TV downstairs, and she assumes everything that happened was nothing but a bad dream. So Linda slips back into her rut.

The next morning she wakes up to find it's the day of her husband's funeral. And the following day she wakes up to find him taking a shower. "You get the sense that there's been a distance in the marriage," Kelly says. "She surprises him by suddenly walking in the shower just to hold him, to know he's alive and real. All he knows is that his wife is acting crazy by walking fully clothed in the shower with him."

As Linda's days keep altering, more and more strange events crop up. Instead of being stuck in a rut, her life becomes a bunch of puzzle pieces that never find a way to fit together until Linda begins to make sense of it all.

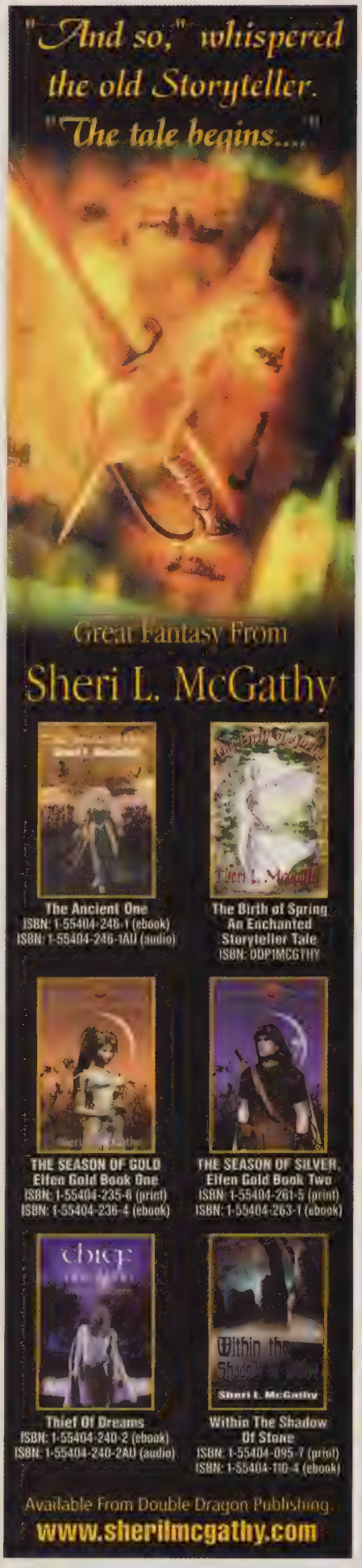
"She makes a map of the whole week," Kelly says. "She starts to chart what happened on what day. She starts seeing all these connections in terms of realizing that she's living the days of her week out of sequence. She realizes there are two days open—Sunday and Friday—and then there's Wednesday, the day her husband is going to die in a car crash. She says to him, 'Do me a favor. If tomorrow is Wednesday, please wake me up before you leave.' She wakes up the next morning, and she's on her couch, holding her husband's picture—it's the day after that first Thursday."

In other words, *Premonition* isn't your standard deja vu movie. The days of Linda's life—before and after her husband dies—somehow get jumbled up and she can't predict in which day she'll land every morning when she wakes up. But every day she uncovers more and more information, including hints that her husband was on the verge of having an affair.

"Now she's ticked off and thinks maybe she's fighting something that was meant to happen," Kelly says. "She goes on a journey where she's exploring what her life would be without him."

Like Linda, Kelly needed to make a map of her days just to keep the storyline straight. "I have it around here somewhere. I took a piece of notebook paper, just to figure out what goes where." Unlike Linda, Kelly didn't have to figure it all out alone. "I was brought out really early before shooting and had a chance to work with the director and actors and go through the script and get their input. I love working with actors, because they're the ones who have to bring this to life. So to get their perspective in terms of the best way to communicate ideas vs. a writer sitting in his chair in his living room is really enlightening and helpful."

Hilary Swank stars in *The Reaping*, due in theaters on March 30 from Warner Brothers. Swank plays Katherine Winter, a former Christian missionary who has become a worldwide expert in debunking miracles. Although Katherine was once devout, she lost her faith when her family was killed. When Katherine goes to a small Louisiana town to investigate a report that it's being visited by the ten Biblical plagues, Katherine realizes there's something going on that science can't explain. If there are evil forces at work here, she will have to regain her faith in order to battle them. *The Reaping* itself has been plagued by an ongoing change in release dates, although signs are that it may show up in theaters this time.



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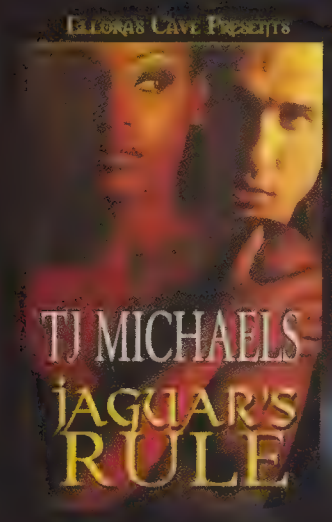

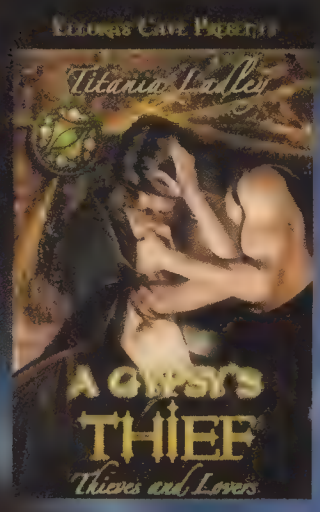

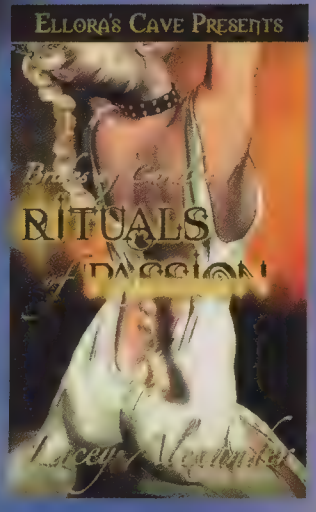

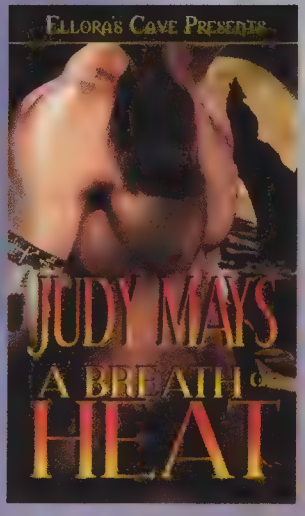

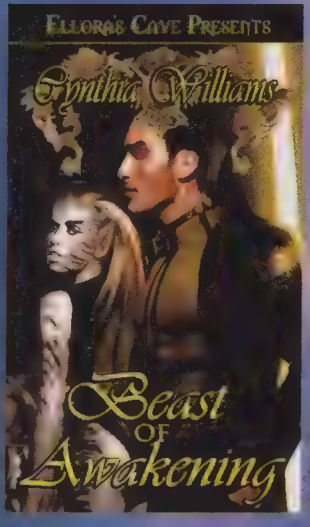

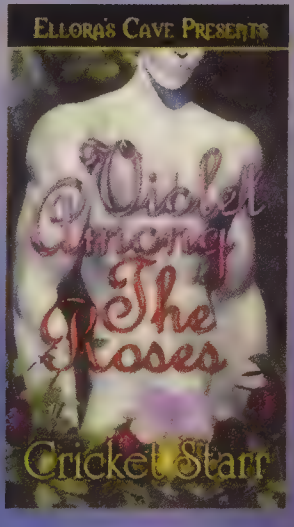

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300: Photos courtesy of Warner Bros

Theron and a group of Spartans watch as King Leonidas prepares to march to Thermopylae.

novel by striving to duplicate it on film. When he first met Butler, it didn't take long for Snyder to realize he'd found King Leonidas. "He was like a madman," Snyder says about Butler. "He stood up. He was ranting around the table. He was making faces. He was looking at people. He said to me, 'Spartans don't walk around like badasses, posing like they're tough guys—they just are. They're just scary.' That's cool. Because as soon as you try to act tough, it becomes a parody. He said, 'I'd rather act crazy.' That's good.

"Frank's Leonidas, Frank's Batman, Frank's Marv [from *Sin City*]—it's the same guy. It's Frank's version of an uncompromising hero who's dark. He's straightforward. He's not good with politics. Leonidas is the same in that way. He's not nice. I don't think you'd want to hang around with him."

The look and feel of the movie are designed to duplicate Miller's graphic novel, but the graphic novel was too short for a feature-length movie. That meant the story had to be expanded. Snyder took Miller's novel—a stylized history story—and turned it into a fantasy by telling it through the eyes of one of the main characters: Dilios, a Spartan played by David Wenham of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Dilios isn't just one of the 300 Spartans—he's their favorite storyteller. He survives the battle of the 300 and tells the story of that battle from his own point of view. Because this adventure brought Dilios face to face with many things he'd never seen before, we see the story through his retelling of it, which draws heavily on Greek mythology. Expect to see everything from monsters to fantasy animals to a Greek oracle who magically floats in the air.

Snyder also decided to flesh out the role of Gorgo, King Leonidas's wife. On one hand, Gorgo's new importance gives some balance to a testosterone-heavy film. On the other hand, this is a *Gladiator*-like movie that's strong on honesty in the way it portrays the violence of ancient times, as well as who the Spartans were. Their lives revolved around being ready to fight at a moment's notice. They were Spartan in every way possible: every actor had to undergo rigorous training to get into the best physical shape of his life because the Spartan costume consists of a pair of sandals, the equivalent of a leather Speedo, and a red cape.

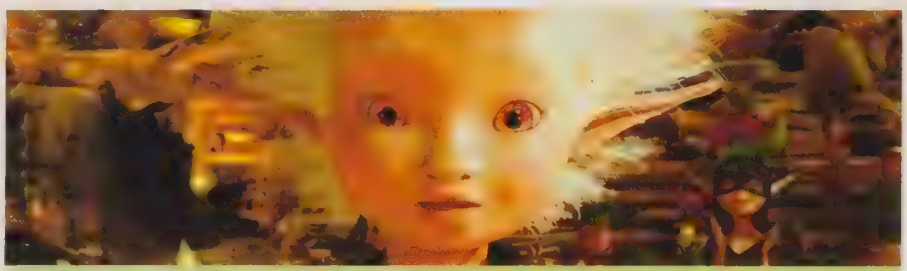
"These guys had been beaten and punished since they were kids," Butler says about the real Spartans. "And that creates a steeliness that shows in every move. It would be too much of an excuse to say, Yeah, they're tough guys but they don't have to play tough. Not that they have to walk around strutting all the time, but at the same time, they are tough and you should see it in their every movement."

After each take on set, Butler raced away, blindly pushing past anyone in his way to stand shoulder to shoulder with Snyder and view the scene just filmed on a tiny monitor. Like two peas in a pod, it's clear they were focused on getting it right.

"We are without a doubt pushing as far as we can," Butler says. "That's what I love. I'm bored with sword-fighting movies, to be honest. You watch so many, it just all looks the same. That's not what we're doing here. It's such a fresh, vibrant, crazy, brutal feel to it. It's very violent. It's very bloody.

"I was surprised by how masculine and, in a lot of ways, unsympathetic the characters were in Miller's graphic novel. I found that really unusual. There didn't seem to be any need to grab the audience's favor.

"These heroes, they do what I think you always want your heroes to do and they never seem to get a chance. Typical heroes always have to be pushed and pushed and then eventually they turn around and they kick somebody's ass. The Spartans do it straight away. They say, "OK. You want a fight? We'll fight We'll love it. We'll kill you, we'll enjoy it, we'll drink your blood.' And yet, they're doing it for a cause. They immediately start with defending their own lives, so within that framework, they can do whatever they want, and they do in terms of the story." ❧



ARTHUR AND THE INVISIBLES

Things are not going well for 10-year-old Arthur (played by Freddie Highmore of *Finding Neverland* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) and his grandmother (Mia Farrow). His grandfather has disappeared, and a real estate developer is after his grandmother's home. Arthur's only hope is to follow the clues his grandfather left behind to unearth a hidden treasure that will save the day. The catch is that the treasure is hidden in the land of the Mimimoys, tiny creatures who live beneath his grandmother's garden; they are so small they are considered invisible. Arthur ventures to the "other side" to seek their help. He teams up with the beautiful Princess Selenia (voiced by Madonna) and her brother Betameche to save the land of the Minimoys from an evil wizard and to find his grandfather's treasure.

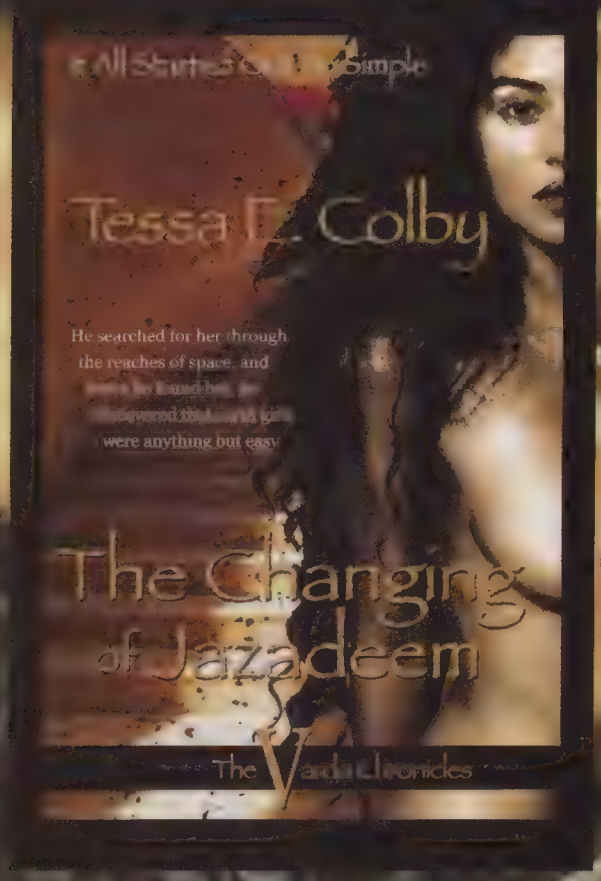
Based on a series of children's books by French filmmaker Luc Besson (*La Femme Nikita, The Fifth Element*), *Arthur and The Invisibles* is a larger-than-life family adventure of courage, heroism, and the power of the imagination. Besson has combined live action with cutting-edge CGI technology to create a film that both parents and children will enjoy. The film had a $80 million budget, and all of it is visible on the screen and in the diverse talent who provide the characters' voices: David Bowie, Robert DeNiro, and Snoop Dog, among others.

The film opened January 12, so be sure to consult your local theater listings so you don't miss this dazzling film. ❧

Laura Cleveland

The Varda Chronicles

From the Mind of Tessa E. Colby


Tessa E. Colby
He searched for her through the reaches of space, and
were anything but easy
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A world of deadly enemies, revenge and obsession... and dark desire

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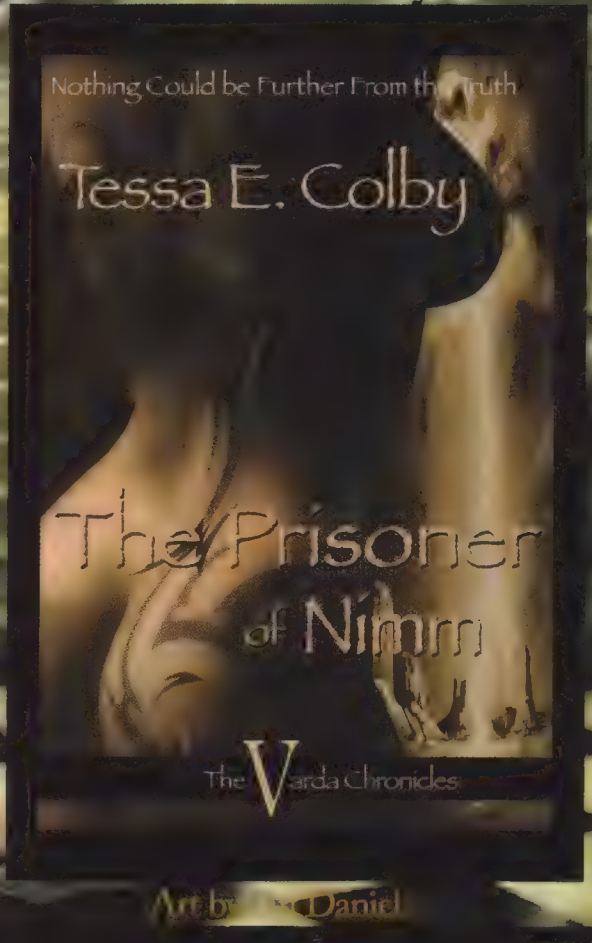
New York Times Best Selling A

Colby is a fearlessly smart, witty and sexy writer. Her writing is bold, brilliant and brims with lush sultry seductions and Machiavellian intrigue. Her cast of characters are absolutely unforgettable. The Varda Chronicles are utterly delicious and so delectably exciting that they are virtually light years ahead of every other paranormal fantasy on the market.

Colby crosses all genre boundaries and she does it flawlessly... Perfectly. This dark and erotic Chronicle is a fast paced romantic thriller with just the right amount of action and adventure. It will both electrify and fascinate. A definate thrill ride.



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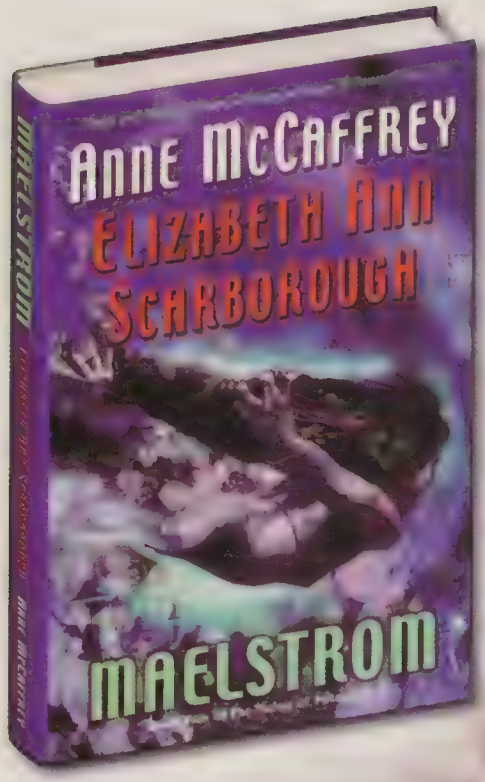

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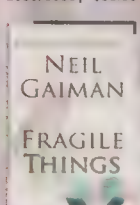

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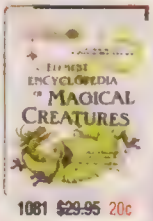

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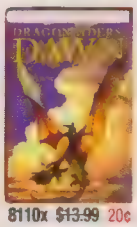

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SFC0702PT-03

By Midori Snyder

Chorus of Clowns: The Ancient Roots of the Masked Comic Theaters

In the middle of winter, when it is so gray I can't take it anymore, I rent as many Marx Brothers movies as I can find. There is something about the zany interaction of these "clowns" creating havoc at a department store, a racetrack, or in the stateroom of an ocean liner that brightens the dullness of the day. Then there is that crackling, fast dialogue, most of it famously improvised, and the elaborate musical numbers, ridiculous dances, and absurd moments of slapstick. Perhaps because I know they are four brothers, I sense a kinship in their characters. Although each one of them wears a different costume and "mask," there is a synchronicity in their performance—for while each one constructs his own comedic business, they do not act alone, but form a madcap chorus of clowns. Watching them, I sense much older traditions layered beneath the surface of their film performances. It is easy to imagine Groucho with satyr's hooves or Harpo in the round wide-mouth mask of an ancient Fool. Inspired by the antics of the Marx Brothers, I decided to review the roots of clowning in the early southern European history of theater clowns—not the circus clowns, but those masked characters who rose out of early pagan cults and then developed into secular, irreverent tricksters and mirrors of human behavior.

Giandomenico Tiepolo captures the rowdy, boisterous behavior of the Commedia dell'Arte clowns in Pulcinellas in Love. *The multiple figures emphasize the outsized egos of the Pulcinellas.*

The history of comic theater and clowns reaches back to the ancient traditions of Greek mime. This early theater derived its sources of inspiration from three cultural branches: the ecstatic revels of the Dionysian cults that celebrated Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility; an abundance of rural folklore with an emphasis on crude humor; and a surprisingly secular perspective of life. The British theater historian Allardyce Nicoll in his classic treatise on early theater, *Mimes, Masks, and Miracles,* describes the secular aspect of the early comic theater as "the glad acceptance of life's brightness, the amused and untroubled realization that this world is nothing but a jest.... [The mimes] based their work on life itself, and never looked beyond; they ridiculed the legends of the old gods just as later they ridiculed the Christian rites... [T]hose who believed in the pagan gods could still laugh when these gods were reduced to ridiculous terms upon the stage." The origins of the clowns, like the trickster figures of myth, arose out of a burgeoning rebellious spirit, expressing the human need to ridicule social propriety through figures licensed to refuse its strictures.

The Rural Dionysia, held in the month of Poseidon (late December to early January), was a rowdy, earthy affair. This festival combined a host of country pleasures: fertility revels, drinking enormous quantities of wine, and singing songs to the god Dionysus. Rudimentary plays probably arose from the improvisational fun of drunken, masked revelers. Out of these cults came two strands of comic theater: the improvisational performances that developed in the Dorian region of ancient Greece and the more formal, written plays for the classical stage. (Socrates and Euripides attended many of these festivals.)

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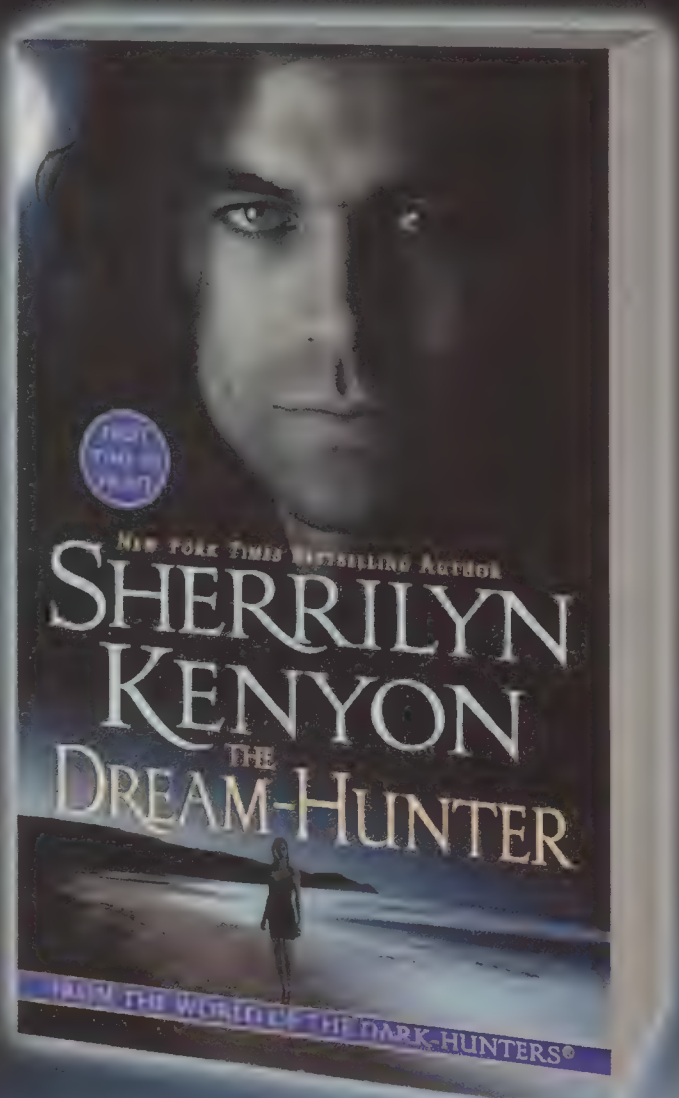

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In 500 BC, as Athenian playwrights were creating tragedies, a few saw the theatrical possibilities in Dionysian revels. Play competitions were presented in the spring at the City Dionysia in honor of the god Dionysus. Each playwright composed three interlocking tragedies and one comedic "satyr" play. The satyr plays were short humorous interludes that lightly referenced the themes of the more serious plays. They found great favor with audiences, who regarded them as a much needed respite.

In Greek mythology, satyrs were servants to Dionysus. Half man, half goat, the creatures were known for their wanton and lascivious behavior, chasing nymphs and drinking freely. They were cunning but cowardly creatures, dangerous to humans on whom they enjoyed playing pranks. They are immediately recognized in Greek art by their shaggy pelts, horses' tails, and enormous phalluses. In the satyr plays, men wore costumes of goat, deer, or panther skins thrown over their naked bodies, along with grotesque masks, wigs of wild hair, and leather phalluses. Twelve to 15 of the satyrs performed the role of the chorus, led by potbellied Silenius, a water spirit. Usually performed in a lonely wood under an open sky, the satyr dialogue was close to natural speech and full of vulgarities, without the solemn formality of the tragedies. The performance style was slapstick with plenty of obscene gestures.

The satyr plays took their themes from mythology and legends, turning gripping heroic tales into humorous, even silly, affairs through the antics of the satyrs. *Cyclops* by Euripedes, for example, recounts the tale of Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant. In Homer's version, Polyphemus has imprisoned Odysseus and his men in his enormous cave, anticipating eating one or two of them a night. After secretly fashioning a stake, Odysseus succeeds in blinding the Cyclops and escaping with his men by hiding under the woolly bellies of Polyphemus's sheep. In Euripedes' satyr play, by contrast, Silenius and the satyrs have been forced to slave for Polyphemus. Silenius must rake clean the massive cave, while the satyrs work as disgruntled shepherds to his sheep. They miss their woods, their nymphs, and above all, their wine. Odysseus arrives in dire need of supplies for his crew. He bargains with Silenius, who is not cooperative until Odysseus offers payment in wine. With a cry of joy, Silenius heads for the cave to steal food for Odysseus, and while he is gone, the satyrs beg Odysseus to regale them with tales from the battle of Troy, interrupting him periodically to deride Helen as "the traitress.... [W]ould there had never have been a race of women born into the world at all, unless it were for me alone!" (translation: Samuel Coleridge)

The plot becomes complicated when Silenius returns with the stolen food, followed by an angry Polyphemus, who demands an explanation. Silenius says he was beaten by the strangers while he fought to protect the cave, but the satyrs quickly ridicule him for his lies. Silenius, knowing the Cyclops' taste in human flesh, points to Odysseus and says to the giant: "I will give thee a word of advice! As for his flesh, leave not a morsel of it, and if thou eat his tongue, Cyclops, thou wilt become a monstrous clever talker." Odysseus and his terrified men are herded into the cave, and the stone is rolled in front of the entrance. Outside, the miserable satyrs wait, imagining the worst in a frenetic and gruesome song and *scisinnis*, a dance that consisted of frenetic skipping and jumping. Soon, however, they have their chance to assist the hero in fashioning the stake intended to blind Polyphemus. But they are not brave enough to actually help Odysseus do the deed and they scatter, watching the activities from a safe distance. Only when Odysseus and his men are free do they rejoin him, happy at last to be returning to their groves and their nymphs.

Sadly, only tantalizing fragments remain of Socrates' satyr play, *Ichneutai* (translated variously as *The Trackers, The Hunters,* or *The Searchers*). The play is based on the myth of the mysterious theft of Apollo's cattle by the trickster Hermes. In the myth, Hermes has hidden the cattle in a cave on Mount Cyllene. When the deception is discovered, Apollo and Hermes have it out in court before Zeus. As part of their eventual reconciliation, Hermes makes a gift of his new invention, the lyre, to Apollo, who is entranced by the sound and becomes the god of music.

Once more the satyr play offers a rougher version of this myth, complete with the usual mishaps, romping, and scatological humor one might expect while hunting lost cattle. Offered a reward of gold by Apollo, Silenius and his satyrs agree to hunt for the missing cattle. Alexander Gross describes the journey of the satyrs in his essay "Goat Singers and Scholars": "Apollo retires, and the satyrs begin their search—now rampantly wanton, now cowering and squealing, they encounter the various hazards of the quest. Much of the time they scramble along on all fours, sniffing the ground like bloodhounds, as they follow the tracks of the missing cattle. A sudden sound is heard that frightens them, and they tumble to the ground in a rout. Silenius goads them back to their feet—this speech is one of the best-preserved parts of the play:

ABOVE: Actors dressed in animal skins prepare for a satyr play. The figure on the right is Silenius. TOP CENTER: Drunken revelers, dressed in their too-short tunics, head home in a Phylax play. LEFT: The centaur Chiron is pushed up a ladder in a Phylax play.

Silenius: What—are you afraid and trembling from a sound? Are you puppet people molded out of wax? You turds of creation! In every shadow you see a bogey and make demons out of everything. You sprawled-out, muscleless, honorless lackeys! Look at yourselves—nothing but bodies, tongues, and pricks. How can you let this happen—you obey the words and you run away from the

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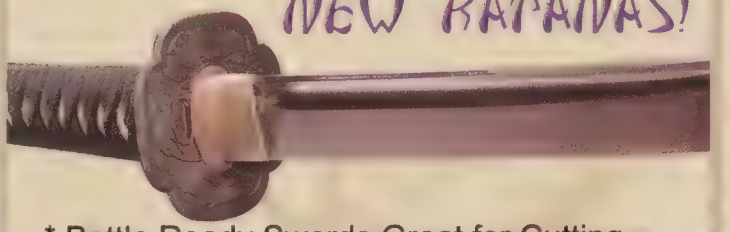

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doing. Think of your father here—you degrade the lowest beasts. When I was young I adorned the hollows of the nymphs and left many memorials to my manhood lying at their bottom. I never ran away, I never even wavered, nor did I cower in dread before the fearful bellowing of mountain beasts. I met them squarely with a spear. But now all of this is tarnished by you, because of a new song piped by a shepherd. How can you be such children—you fear before you see. Would you lose the shimmering gold the sun-god offered us? And what of the freedom he promised you—and myself as well? Would you go to sleep and give this all away? Back to the trail and take up the scent, find the cattle and the cattle-keeper, or I'll make you cry out for your cowardice."

The satyrs and Silenius meet the mountain nymph Cyllene who scolds them for profaning the mountains with their raucous behavior. However, using their noses, they have tracked the cattle to her cave, where they now begin a hilarious discourse on "bull shit." Cyllene remains prim, refusing to acknowledge the brown piles all around as the satyrs continue to sniff and prod. The manuscript breaks off here, and it is hard to know whether the satyrs' comments on bull shit are aimed at Apollo, Cyllene, or themselves.

Tiepolo painted another large group of Pulcinellas gathered around dancing dogs. The group's focus is also on a young and beautiful woman.

As the playwrights were developing scripts for satyrs, in the countryside Greek Dorian mimes were creating a popular rural comic theater. Mime here means "mimic," and the Greek mimes were considerably noisy compared with the silent affairs of modern mime. These performances included song, dance, and the improvised dialogue between favorite stock characters that appeared in hilarious comic sketches. Costumes including broad, grotesque masks, wild hair, and large phalluses dangling beneath too short tunics suggest they too were influenced by the early masked revels of the Dionysian cults. As early as 581 BC, the citizens of the Dorian city of Megara were producing comedies in which ordinary men interacted with a host of gods and devils in a frankly burlesque performance. Nicoll suggests, "[T]he form this burlesque took evidently called for the dragging down of the divine legends to the level of ordinary life. Of prime importance it is to note that burlesque of the divine or heroic legend has always been associated with all forms of mimic drama." These comedies were not scripted plays, but largely improvised by both professional and amateur troupes of actors composed of both men and women. The stock characters of these plays included Herakles (the god whose misadventures with humans seem to have been a favorite plot), an old man with a pointed beard, an old-hag-like woman, a fool, an incompetent doctor, and at least two slaves, who were often thieves

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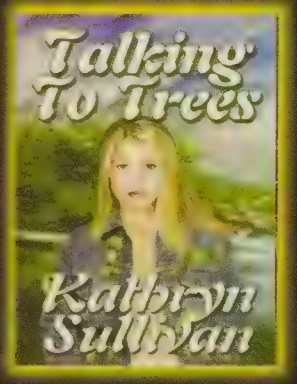

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and gluttons. The performance was livened up with operatic bits, when the speakers mixed dialogues with snatched songs, a few dance steps, and perhaps a bit of sleight of hand. Occasionally, there were dancers in animal masks of pigs, asses, and cocks, along with jugglers, acrobats, and fire eaters.

Over time, the traditions of the Dorian mimes migrated northward toward Italy. The Phlyax comic theater developed in the Greek colonies of southern Italy and served as a bridge between early the early Greek comic theater of Megara and the later evolution of comedy in Rome. Like the Dorian mimes, Phlyax comedies formed around mythological burlesques in which ordinary citizens became entangled with legendary heroes, especially Odysseus and Herakles. Perhaps these two figures were so popular because they echoed the transgressive nature of rural comic theater. If one's life was in the hands of fickle gods, certainly these two human characters had had more than their fair share of entanglements. Odysseus was a cunning enough trickster to thwart the gods (and even sleep with a goddess or two), and Herakles, although he was half divine, suffered the insults of the goddess Hera.

We can get a vivid impression of what Phylakes comedies were like from vases, painted with scenes from the plays, showing these two heroic figures often in compromising or questionable positions. On one vase, Herakles follows a veiled woman with lusty intentions, only to draw back in horror when she turns and reveals her hag's face. On other vases, Herakles uses his club to batter down a door while his servant, seated on a horse, keeps guard; Odysseus battles an old man for possession of the image of Pallas he has stolen from Troy. Zeus, a crowd pleaser no doubt because of his persistent womanizing, appears on vases ogling a woman in a window while an old man holds a ladder for the god to climb. There are depictions of drunken actors prancing before Dionysus, and various nymphs gazing down from their windows looking amused while hapless slaves try to pull and push the elderly centaur Chiron up the ladder to meet them.

The Phlyaxes combined these mythological burlesques with comedies of everyday life: the agony of a hangover when returning from a revel, the struggle to pay the rent, and many scenes involving the preparation food and feasting. The cast included ordinary unmasked characters, as well as masked stock characters who were becoming ever more solidified in their archetypal roles. For example, the masks of the old men always showed them to be either bald with small pointed beards, or snub-nosed and clean-shaven. The mask of a peasant had a small white cap with two peaks, almost like a cockscomb (bearing a striking similarity to the later fool's caps of the Middle Ages). There are several slave masks but with similar features: a stump nose, a wide-open mouth, and worried brow. The Phlyakes introduced a slave mask, one with a bald head and a sharply raised eyebrow, that gave the face a wild, asymmetrical look. Phylax costumes were simple, short tunics over thin leggings that created the impression of nakedness. Many of the characters wore heavy padding around the middle for a paunch, or on the hip to create a large rump (not unlike the hind end of an ass). The settings for the plays were simple, suggested more by props than scenery: rudimentary altars, thrones for important characters, a laurel bush to represent a grove, and a tripod with a wooden structure atop intended to be Apollo's temple at Delphi.

After the demise of the Phylax sometime in 300 BC, the comedic theater found a new expression in the indigenous *fabula Atellana* from the Oscan town Atella in the Campania (near Naples). The Atella used the familiar masks and stock characters but drew their plots almost entirely from the rural life of its audiences with only rare appearances by mythological and legendary figures. These stories were rife with all the sins and scandals of any community. In these short Atellan farcical plays, we begin to see the first inklings of a not-yet-born Italian comic theater, the Commedia dell'Arte. As with the Commedia, the Atellan farces crowded the stage with stock characters, fools, and tricksters, known

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Although most of the performances of the Commedia dell'Arte were improvised, they were full of stock characters and scenarios. Here two clowns are engaged in a mock sword fight.

by their appetites and foibles; actors spent their careers polishing the roles of these specific masks. Bucco, the first of four stock characters, was a boisterous but stupid fool, who delights in bragging and eating. His mask has a high forehead, puffed-out cheeks, and wide-open mouth (*bucca* means cheek or mouth). Dossenuss appeared as a scary mask with an exaggerated jaw full of teeth and a huge hooked nose. In small statues he was shown hunchbacked and corpulent, often with a large wart on the end of his beak-nose. Like Bucco, he was considered a fool—but of a higher order, for he was witty, malicious, and clever enough to obtain his food at the public's expense. Maccus was known as a glutton and clumsy head-banging, toe-stubbing fool. His mask was round, plump, and bald-headed, emphasizing his soft, pudgy features. The name of Pappus, the last of the four, came from the Greek *pappos* meaning papa. An old man with a bald head and straggling beard, he was stupid and wandering in mind, and often taken advantage of by younger companions.

The Atellan farces became popular enough to spread in professional troupes from Naples up to Rome where they were beloved by audiences for their burlesques, rude wit, and bold political satire. On occasion, performers got away with outrageous political barbs, and audiences roared their approval when, for example, an excessive emperor was slyly referred to as "the old-he goat." But there were risks involved in pushing the satire too far. The Emperor Caligula once went so far as to burn the writer of an Atellan farce alive. While condemned by the intellectual upper classes as merely obscene, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest the Atellan farce mixed delicate phrasing and a rich tradition of puns with its naughty, rustic wit. The Latin may have been in the vulgate, but it was wielded by clever comedians who knew how to manipulate the language. City youths with time on their hands formed small groups to bring Atellan farces to the public in various venues, while professional Atellan troupes performed in small neighborhood theaters and at royal banquets, alongside poets, harp players, and tragedians. The Atellan farces flourished as a popular entertainment for almost 150 years before being slowly eclipsed by the elaborate mimic dramas approved by the state.

These early forms of comic theater lay the foundations of a low-brow comedy. In *Mimes, Masks, and Miracles*, Nicoll describes it thus: "All make free use of every means offered by the stage. Music, dancing, and acrobatics mingle with regular dialogue. The dramatic poet for the most part remains in the background; much of the mimic activity is purely improvisational. All keep strictly to life. There may be exaggeration, but there is no artificiality. The gods are brought from the high paths of Olympus to walk the common streets along with grotesquely conceived characters of the day. The bombastic and grandiloquent language of tragedy is dragged from its tottering throne and mocked at. Naturally, this being so, all these forms of drama are unconfined in scope; they sweep not only over the whole of human life, but, in their secular tendencies and in their general appeal, embrace along with these all creations of myth, all abstract figures of the popular imagination." While court jesters and "wise fools" who attended royalty offered solo performances like a standup comic, the Dorian mimes, satyr plays, Phlyax, and Atellan farces created an unruly crowd of clowns and fools in whose convoluted plots and antics an audience might see its own human weaknesses, its foolishness, and its appetites played out in frank, good humor.

As popular as they once were until the close of the first century, afterward these stock characters faded from the broad public stage. Scholars don't know precisely why they disappeared, but given that they reappeared years later in Commedia dell'Arte, it is believed that they returned to their rural roots where they settled into Christian mystery plays as well as local pagan festivities that the Church never quite succeeded in suppressing.

The rediscovery of classical texts in the 14th century brought about a revival in the comic theater, especially in France and Italy. The plays of Plautus were discovered in 1429, along with six comedies from Terence. These two popular playwrights from ancient Rome had adapted the early Greek comedies into Roman versions. The Roman comedies reintroduced to Europe the idea of a play as an experience in itself, rather than being an adjunct to a religious occasion, as the Mystery Plays had been. The Roman comedies offered a flexibility of form not available in the more complicated liturgical productions. The action of the comedies occurred in one, usually familiar setting, rather than in the biblical city of Jerusalem or on a mountaintop. Whereas the Mystery Plays were symbolic representations of profound mystical truths, calling for the audience members to bolster their faith and mend their ways, the new comedies were mimetic, rather than symbolic. The drama here tended toward the physical rather than the spiritual and the language was frank and direct. Actors on the stage, rather than portraying the ritual and symbolic figures of the faith, were now instructed to mimic as closely as possible the speech and behavior of their audiences.

Out of this reintroduction of the Roman comedy arose the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, or as it was more popularly known at the time, la Commedia degli Zanni (the comedy of clowns) or la Commedia non scritta (the comedy of improvisation). Once again clowns filled the stage with their foolish antics and insatiable appetites. Itinerant performers gathered together in small, semiprofessional troupes touring their productions across Italy and the rest of Europe. They performed before rustic audiences on narrow, portable stages, and the best of the troupes were invited to the royal estates of the aristocracy where they performed in elegant banquet halls. The success of a Commedia troupe depended on its skill at adapting improvised scripts to accommodate the wide variety of audiences it faced on its journeys. Upon arriving in a region it was not uncommon for an actor to scout out the local gossip, scandals, and infamous citizens of the village or town. Such information would be incorporated into the night's performances as improvised asides. These "in jokes" brought a sense of engagement and merriment to audiences delighted to find themselves the subject of the comedy.

As in the Roman and Greek comedies, it is

the clowns and fools who predominate among the masks. The Zanni (a generic name for the Italian clowns), like their counterparts in antiquity, are drawn from the lowest social orders. Instead of slaves, the masked zanni of the Commedia are the dispossessed workers and immigrants from poor rural communities. Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries was not so much a single country as an eclectic collection of states, with regional dialects. This influenced the development of the Commedia's stock characters, as each mask derives from a different region. Arleccino, a country bumpkin, hails from "lower Bergamo," and like his predecessor Bucco has an outsized appetite for food and foolishness. Brighella is from "upper Bergamo," considered the craftier part of the town. Although a servant, Brighella's intelligence has allowed him to better himself. In the plays he is an opportunist and conniver, capable of offering advice to a young lord down on his luck. Pulcinella seems to be a reincarnation of the Atellan mask of Dossenuss. He is hunchbacked and pot-bellied and his mask has a deeply furrowed forehead, a hooked nose like a bird of prey, and mustache. This is a quarrelsome clown, who can be by turns faithful, revengeful, cowardly, and a bully. His extravagant personality was captured in a series of hilarious drawings by Giandomenico Tiepolo. As if to emphasize the outsized ego of the clown, Tiepolo has drawn him as a group of "Pulcinelli" filling the edges of the page with their activities.

The masks of old men include a host of familiar stock characters from the ancient theater: Pantelone, the greedy miser, who clutches his money bag but is foolish enough to lose it all lusting after a young woman. Il Dottore, an elderly bachelor (or if he is married, a cuckold) is an orator, although he never makes any sense. He rambles on in various speeches and is often carried off the stage still talking. Tartaglia, whose name comes from the Italian verb meaning "to stammer," is another elderly gentleman who makes a brief stammering appearance, usually as an additional comic opportunity. While neither a clown nor an old man, Il Capitano serves as another role model for the puffed-up arrogance and buffoonery of the upper class. An alleged soldier, he boasts of ridiculous bravery, but never fights as he is more inclined to become entangled in his overly long sword. He woos the young noblewoman, but never wins her affection.

Although the performances were improvised, the actors had a stock repertoire of scenes and stories they could draw upon. The performances were physical affairs of tumbling, slapstick, mock fighting, and stolen kisses. In between acts, a young ingénue might perform a charming song on a mandolin, or one of the lovers would recite a well-known poem on the subject of love. Usually, the plays centered around the problems of marriage, faithful and adulterous spouses, beautiful young widows in dire straits, cheating boyfriends, and elderly men chasing young skirts. The comedy took pleasure in exposing the inappropriateness of an old man thwarting a young couple in love by becoming an obstacle to their marriage. Either he was a father preventing the marriage, all the while lusting after the young serving girl, or he was an unlikely suitor, but with wealth enough to purchase the necessary dowry. The clowns acted to confuse the situation, creating a kind of anarchy on stage through misunderstandings and deceptions. But the net result of their chaos was restoration of balance. The greedy old man was separated from his money and the object of his lust. The lovers were married, and the servants were either fed or bedded at last with the serving girl.

And so I return to the Marx Brothers. There is Groucho, the satyr, his phallus-like cigar twiddling between his fingers as the huge black eyebrows wriggle suggestively at the nearly naked young woman in a silky sheath. He dances an impromptu tango, bent over, cheek to jowl and one can almost see the twitching tail. He turns on a hoof and sidles up to the matronly (but oh so well connected) Marguerite Dumas. (Was there ever a modern female character with such Penelope-suffering patience?) Chico is Brighella, the craftier superior fool, while Harpo, following in the footsteps of Arleccino and Bucco, is his follower in pandemonium. Chico represents the "brains" and quick wit of the crafty fool, while Harpo excels in physical pranks, cutting off ties (another modern phallic joke), honking his horn, and chasing after coat-check girls, cigarette girls, and nurses. As an added bonus, Harpo's performances always poked a pin in the high-brow disdain for low-brow humor. In the midst of some mad chase, a magic moment would arise and he would sit down at a harp (oh, lyre of Apollo) and play exquisitely. The plots, of course, most often revolved around acquiring wealth, the chance to eat well, making fun of pompous high society types, getting the girl, marriage, and reconnecting the confused and addled lovers.

The chorus of clowns rips apart polite society and in that act exposes our true feelings. In this joyful disorder, we remember primal emotions: we lust, we become envious and jealous, we are starved for affection and fame, and we long for an illusive, trouble-free happiness. We would rather sleep than work; we are clever and undeniably foolish at times. We are complicated, conflicted, and no single character can carry the weight of so many inconsistencies. Despite their secular natures, the clowns are still mythic to me. Humor is an old response to fear of the unknown and contempt for the familiar. For 3,000 years, somewhere a chorus of clowns has misbehaved and, in their audacity, called down gods, heroes, and legends for a face-to-face meeting with humanity, offering laughter as a form of reverence. ❧

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Adventures in Unhistory: Conjectures on the Factual Foundations of Several Ancient Legends (Tor, New York, hardcover, $25.95) gives the reader a marvelous chance to see Davidson in full research mode and completely unencumbered, so to speak, with the job of turning it into fiction. Here he takes his brilliant mind on one vacation after another—he calls the essays in this book "adventures"—as he dives into a multitude of spectacular topics, new and ancient, that have intrigued many other inquiring minds—yours included, I'll wager—examining them with joyful industry and trying to see if he can discover facets of them and secrets behind them that preceding explorers might have missed.

Illustration courtesy of Daniel Dos Santos

Daniel Dos Santos created the spectacular cover illustration for Spirits That Walk in Shadows *by Nina Kiriki Hoffman.*

The book starts out with a fine, feisty introduction by Peter S. Beagle who is in a perfectly understandable high dudgeon about the failure of the literary establishment to give Davidson his just due and the world to give his works the sort of reading they certainly deserve. I hope if you haven't read much of Davidson's fiction, or given that which you have read proper attention, that Beagle's knuckle rapping will persuade you to do so.

The range of topics covered in the book is delightfully wide and I guarantee reading them will kick all sorts of unused corners of your brain into action with results that may be genuinely startling.

His scholarly investigation on "The Secret of Hyperborea" is sure to make you stare thoughtfully into space at least a dozen times, particularly over the bits about insects in amber. You will never feel quite the same way about lycanthropy after perusing "The Boy Who Cried Werewolf" (which includes, apropos of nothing in particular, a great quote from dear old Charles Fort, bless his heart: "In measuring a circle, one begins anywhere."). And one of the most consistently amusing of the adventures, "What Gave All Those Mammoths Cold Feet?" reveals the main reason we were so slow to grasp the notion that armies of great hairy beasts once walked the Earth in spite of the discovery of untold thousands of their huge old bones was that they were always successfully attributed to being one of Hannibal's living tanks in spite of the fact it was a matter of record the great Carthaginian never had more than 20 of the poor old things to conquer the world with.

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The variety of the adventures is stimulating all in itself as they range from an essay on Sinbad the Sailor (asking and attempting to answer the question "Where Did He Sail?") to fascinating examinations of the viability of Unicorns in one and Mermaids in another, and each and every adventure is packed with little adventures I suspect and almost guarantee will keep you mulling years after you've put down this lovely book.

I'll confess my particular favorites—they seem to strike with particular delicacy and firmness just the right note of wacky yet serious scholarship strived for throughout—are "Who Makes the Mandrakes?" which tracks down the diverse mysteries surrounding this legendary plant by scrupulously examining its name and its origins (by the way, let me pass on and perhaps correct the error of your ways by announcing I have finally been taught that the word "mandragora" is correctly pronounced "monDRAGora" and not "mandraGORa," as I confess I have been doing it from childhood) and a really charming dissertation called "Heads I Win, Heads You Lose" that ranges from the lopping off of the tops of British Royals to the use of elaborately preserved talking heads by ancient priests as oracles, to the wild headhunters of Borneo who, it turns out, weren't all that good at preserving their trophies, to the Jivaros of Ecuador who were among the best because they hit upon the simple yet profound maneuver of removing the skull so that the skin could be tanned as neatly as a shoe and the head made all around far more transportable than all previous models.

A marvelous entertainment and a special joy to anyone with a taste for the fantastic.

The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror by John Clute (Payseur & Schmidt, Cauheegan, WI, hardcover) is a tiny little book put out by what I guess is a pretty tiny little press, but it is a very clever press since the book gives John Clute, who is, I think, the best and brightest critic of our general genre alive, the chance to really let himself go full blast on a project that is both unique and brilliant. And—just to show how generous they are—they've hired Jacob McMurray to gather up a multitude of some of the best bizzaro artists working and see what creepy and delicious visions they can come up with regarding such dark notions as Affect Horror, Sighting, Thickening, Revel, Aftermath, and Hook.

I am and always have been a delighted fan of horror, as is somewhat alarmingly testified to by the crude but childishly charming little crayon sketches of monsters and ghosts that my mother lovingly saved and put aside so that I could come across them years and years later and be deeply touched and more than a little horrified by them.

I have read and mulled over almost all of the many commentaries on horror I've come across, though there really aren't that many, possibly because the topic is more than a little disturbing and gets far less attention than does fantasy in general and science fiction which are its fellow arts, and have enjoyed and been somewhat illumined by a number of them, but this little survey by Clute leaves them all in the shade. Or is it menacing darkness?

He makes a point of emphasizing from the start in his genuinely bone-chilling introduction that what he has produced is a lexicon and it is presented in that form with 30 entries arranged in alphabetical order and a key that gently takes the reader's hand and shows him or her how the make his or her way through the book. I suggest you read the latter very, very carefully as genuinely serious consideration of the articles contained in this book can easily lead to disorientation and even brief periods of blind panic, so you'll really want to know how to escape into some possibly comforting cross reference (don't count on it!) or just plain make your way to the exit since the entry you're reading has suddenly revealed a vista of awfulness that up to now, all your whole life, you've somehow managed to successfully deny and now you really badly need a drink or at least some quiet place where you can hug yourself and have a good cry into a pillow.

The titles of the entries in *The Darkening Garden* give fair warning that the reader is about to enter dangerous ground. IDENTITY LOSS, INFECTION, and MOTIF OF HARMFUL SENSATION—to pluck three at random from the Table of Contents in their alphabetical order—surely suggest that this little black volume is not going to be a walk in the park.

To show how extremely fairly Clute is playing, he very considerately lays out the basic notion of this potent little book in the very first paragraph of the Introduction to this most remarkable book just to make sure the potential reader will have had sufficient warning at the start and can safely back off and crawl away before he or she has dipped more than one toe in the chilling waters darkly spreading out ahead.

Let me quote this very excerpt from the introduction to *The Darkening Garden* for you in its entirety so that the more cowardly among you can save yourselves a lot of time and trouble and the bravest can have an intriguing taste of the insights yet to come:

"The title has more than one meaning. It echoes the funeral last words Cyril Connolly wrote in the last section of his journal *Horizon* in 1949, that "It is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair." It refers to the increasing pathos of the various secret gardens in the literature of the 20th century: gates and passageways are no longer portals to paradise, as in Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden,* but Waste Lands, as in Keith Donohue's *The Stolen Child.* It refers to the disappointment management culture of the West as it declines; to the illusion that it's OK to continue to consume what consumes us, that the Garden will continue to feed our utterly sad maws. It also refers to the world itself darkening beyond consumption; because describing the fate of the Garden of the world is the underlying burden—as far as this lexicon is concerned—of Horror."

You have been warned.

I am sure as readers of *Realms of Fantasy* you must be well aware of and very grateful to Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling as they have put together more than 25 (so the blurb on the cover informs me) of the best anthologies of the fantastic ever assembled.

Of course, they're best known for the creation of the annual miracle, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror,* which has inspired a whole, thriving subindustry in the publishing field, but they are also creating a growing number of new anthology series in worlds of the imaginative that are attempting to and, happily, succeeding at seeing what they can do to expand, re-energize, and free up the genre and maybe even bust it open a little.

The Salon of the Fantastique: Fifteen Original Tales of Fantasy (Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, trade paperback, $16.95) is based on the interesting notion of recreating something like the Literary Salons that appeared in 17th-century France, were usually set up by powerful women interested in the arts (I have no doubt Datlow and Windling are well aware of their little joke), and did all they could to provide an environment that would not only give talented people of their time exposure to influential folk who might encourage them and even help them along financially, but which would also allow them to explore areas that ordinary commercial outlets were not only disinterested in but sometimes actively discouraged.

This anthology, which I imagine and hope will turn out to be only the first of a series, differs from all of their previous collections in that it purposefully avoids catering to any specific audience and, outside of the general and highly plastic notion of the "Fantastic," it sets out to pay very little mind to all conventional genre distinctions and the door is wide open to any sort of plot or character or ambience the author feels moved to explore, so long as the exploration is an interesting one.

Between the two of them, Datlow and Win-

dling have certainly managed to gather up a highly impressive array of authors who do not in any way disappoint. Peter S. Beagle, Delia Sherman, Gregory Maguire, Lucius Shepard, and on and on, writers you've read before, writers you've probably yet to meet. The tales take place in all kinds of places and involve all sorts of people up to and including a brush with Al-Qaeda.

The stories are extremely varied, the promise to explore all kinds of options is generously fulfilled. Personally I enjoyed every one of them but that, of course, is no surprise because, as you probably know, you really don't go wrong with Datlow and Windling.

In their introduction they point out that the original salons that inspired them to produce this book also helped to kick off the French Revolution.

Let's see what happens ...

Gahan Wilson

The Orphan's Tales, Volume I: In the Night Garden, Catherynne M. Valente, Spectra, trade paperback, 352 pp., $14.00, ISBN: 0-553-38403-1.

This wondrous book, illustrated somewhat unevenly by the comic book artist Michael Kaluta, is by far the most successful and accessible yet from the dazzlingly talented Catherynne M. Valente. It encompasses a number of lofty predecessors without being diminished by them. First and foremost, it models

itself upon *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* not only in its central conceit, of a woman spinning out nightly stories to a prince, but in its Middle Eastern fantasyland setting. But it is also a novel about storytelling, a self-conscious postmodernist narrative exercise that calls to mind John Barth's brain-twisting novella "Dunyazadiad" and Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.*

A mysterious girl whose bizarre appearance has led to a gentle but solitary captivity within the sultan's lush gardens tells stories to one of that monarch's young sons, a boy who first approaches her to demonstrate his bravery in the face of a monster but quickly becomes enamored of her and her tales. As do we. These tales are astonishing inventions that perfectly capture the feel of traditional fairy tales without ever merely recapitulating them; oh, there are elements shared with existing fairy tales and myths, but only because Valente is drawing on the same primal sources. Each of her tales spins off into another, burrowing deeper into the heart of story, as character after character insists upon being heard, upon telling his, her, or its own story, all of them weaving together into a sumptuous and satisfying whole. The movement is inward, then outward again, then inward, from the depths to the surface and back again, in a cyclical pattern appropriately reminiscent of sleep rhythms or the stitches that make up a tapestry. This structure works beautifully to build suspense and layer complexity into the novel. Very early it becomes apparent that each of the tales related by Valente's characters, of pirates, monsters, shape-shifters, and living stars, is a facet of a bigger tale: a tale too large for a single volume to contain.

Just as extraordinary as the unflagging yet never grasping inventiveness that distinguishes these pages, and which holds not only for the individual stories but the vast mythos that slowly emerges into view, underpinning and overarching them, is the degree to which Valente succeeds in grounding her flights of fancy in characters—some human, some not—that we come to know and care deeply about.

Dragon Avenger, E.E. Knight, Roc, New York, trade paperback, 384 pp., $14.00, ISBN: 0-451-46109-X.

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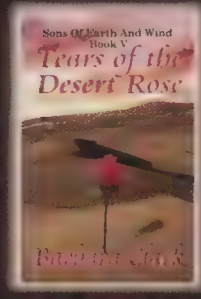

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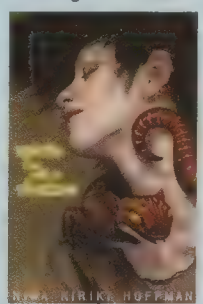
NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Beka Cooper: Terrier, by Tamora Pierce, Random House, 2006. Beka Cooper is a rookie peacekeeper in the worst section of Tortall's capital city, and her first six months on the job may be more than she can handle, as she gets caught up in solving two nasty cases. She'll need all the help she can get—from her mentors, her friends, and from her own unique abilities—if she wants to stay alive and bring the bad guys to justice. Set nearly 200 years before *Alanna: The First Adventure,* this book introduces a new hero into the Tortall setting to great success. Beka's an admirable heroine with a compelling voice all her own, and her story is a fast-paced, exciting one. *Terrier* definitely ends up on my Best YA Books of 2006 list as a must-read.

Spirits That Walk In Shadow, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Viking, 2006. Kim suffers from a depression that prevents her from pursuing her art. Jaimie comes from a family where everything is accomplished magically. As freshmen roommates in college, they're both out of their element, especially when Kim's problem turns out to have a dangerous, magical origin. Now they have to learn to work together and trust one another if they want to make it to the end of the semester intact. But then again, college is all about new experiences and growing up, right? Easily one of Hoffman's best books in recent years, *Spirits That Walk in Shadow* is intriguing, beautiful, haunting, and well-worth checking out.



Larklight, by Phillip Reeve, Bloomsbury, 2006. In an alternate Victorian era, the English have conquered the solar system, but something old and nasty is about to challenge that dominance. Caught right in the middle of a mysterious plot to conquer the universe are Myrtle and Art Mumby, who live with their father in Larklight, a house orbiting beyond the Moon. Now the siblings must contend with space pirates, evil spiders, alien races, and technology gone wrong to save the day. *Larklight* is a Victorian space adventure with a unique style and voice, evoking childrens' books of old and infusing them with a steamtech science fiction energy. This is one of the most unusual books I've read lately, and one of the most enjoyable. I hope to see more in this series.

Flora Segunda, by Ysabeau S. Wilce, Harcourt, 2007. Flora Fyrdraaca lives with her family—the dwindled remnants of a once-mighty dynasty—in Crackpot Hall, a sprawling magical mansion of impossible size that has likewise fallen into disrepair. When a wrong turn in the house brings Flora into the heart of a dark family secret, she gets involved in a series of wild, unlikely, heart-pounding adventures that could spell doom for her and her family, or restore their fortunes. Only Flora has what it takes to defy everything she's ever known, discern long-buried truths, and save the day. *Flora Segunda* is a strange new tale of magical mischief, mayhem, and mystery that's sure to entertain. Wilce has a lovely debut on her hands with this book.

Cupid, by Julius Lester, Harcourt, 2007. Psyche is a young woman whose extreme beauty brings her nothing but loneliness and dissatisfaction. Cupid is the god of love, ordered by his mother, Venus, to make sure Psyche falls in love with the most unsuitable, undesirable man possible. Instead, Cupid falls for Psyche himself, thus beginning a love story like no other. For the gods are capricious, and those who fall under their influence never escape unscathed. Before Cupid and Psyche can live happily ever after, they'll both undergo great challenges and dangerous tasks. But if they succeed, their love will be legendary. *Cupid* is a wonderful retelling of a series of old Greek myths, reinvigorated with modern energy and a wry, accessible tone. Lester skillfully draws upon myth and legend to deliver an enjoyable story here, one that's sure to please.

Water Song, by Suzanne Weyn, Simon Pulse, 2006. When a young woman is stranded at her family estate in Belgium in early 1915, she's granted a first-hand experience of the horrors of war, caught between the German and Allied forces. Shortly after rescuing an American soldier, she and her unlikely companion are taken hostage by German forces, and the shared experience forges a bond of friendship and magic between the two. Weyn's latest entry into the "Once Upon A Time" series skillfully and imaginatively retells the Frog Prince fairy tale in an underused setting to great effect. It's both romantic and magical, and a fun read.

Fangs 4 Freaks, by Serena Robar, Berkley Jam, 2006. As the newly appointed Protector of vampire half-bloods, Colby Blanchard is raring to go, having engineered the creation of a sorority house where her kind can learn to exist in peace. Too bad many full-bloods just want Colby and her friends dead. Now Colby has to contend with vampiric royalty, a half-blood who wants to return to her vegan diet, a snarky Goth for a best friend, assorted vampire hunters, and oh yes, a potential traitor in the house. To add insult to injury, Colby's vampire boyfriend won't make the first move! What's a girl to do? This sequel to *Braced 2 Bite* is just as wry, charming, and cheerfully twisted as the first in the series, and it makes for a nice change of pace from the more serious vampire dramas out there.

The Salem Witch Tryouts, by Kelly McClymer, Simon Pulse, 2006. Prudence Stewart's life in Beverly Hills is turned upside-down when her family moves to Salem, Massachusetts, so they can once again embrace their cultural heritage: as powerful witches. Now Prudence has to cope with an entire school of people light-years ahead of her in talent and skill, and all she has to bring to the game is a familiarity with mundane ways, and a heck of a cheerleading routine. Is victory achieved through pom-poms and backflips? Around here, it is! This is an entertaining tale that doesn't take itself too seriously as it merges an insular Harry Potter-esque magical subculture with modern pop culture sensibilities. ❧

In *Grendel,* John Gardner retold the epic of Beowulf from the point of view of the monster, and E.E. Knight takes a similar tack in his Age of Fire series. His heroes are fire-breathing dragons, his villains the armored knights who vaingloriously hunt them down, chief among them a pitiless mercenary hunter called Dragonblade. Last year's *Dragon Champion* introduced the gray dragon Auron, born scaleless and without the ability shared by the rest of his kind to manufacture armor by ingesting gold and other metals. Literally from the moment of birth, Auron had to fight to survive, fending off, and crippling, the other male in his clutch, a nameless orange dragon. When his mother and sister Jizara were cruelly butchered by dwarves led by Dragonblade, only Auron and his other sister, Wistala, escaped, setting out to find their father, AuRel (a nice Kryptonian echo!). But the young dragons, still unable to fly, were hunted, and soon Auron was separated from Wistala: his subsequent adventures I will leave interested readers to discover for themselves. *Dragon Avenger* is Wistala's story.

It's a coming-of-age tale that combines the young dragonelle's burning thirst for revenge against Dragonblade and the dwarf responsible for hiring him, a treacherous and arrogant opportunist named Gobold, with the more noble strivings of a naturally generous heart and a quick and curious mind gradually opening to a world in which dragons are widely feared and hated. Wistala is an immensely appealing heroine. Brave and resourceful, she refuses to let her experiences poison her against all two-legs, yet neither does she forget or forgive those responsible for murdering her family.

Her quest for vengeance takes her on a strange journey that brings her unanticipated friendships with, among others: an imperious cat, Yari-Tab; two elves, Rainfall, a duke whose land is terrorized by a loathsome troll (Knight outdoes himself with this rubbery obscenity of a monster), and Ragwrist, owner of a traveling circus that Wistala joins; and Stog, an initially unlikable mule who turns into one of the most memorable characters in the book. All the while, Wistala draws nearer to her dreamed-of revenge and a climactic showdown with Dragonblade.

Dragon Champion and *Dragon Avenger* are violent at times, but I had no hesitation in passing them on to my 12-year-old nephew, who loves them even more than I do.

Pictures from an Expedition, Alexander C. Irvine, Night Shade Books, San Francisco, trade paperback, 225 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 1-59780-049-X.

With three ambitious and well-received novels to his credit, *A Scattering of Jades, The Narrows,* and *One King, One Soldier,* Alexander Irvine has established himself as one of the most interesting and intelligent new writers of historical fantasy. If you're not already familiar with his work, imagine a literary mash-up of Tim Powers and E.L. Doctorow. Irvine's strong new collection, *Pictures from an Expedition,* features a number of excellent stories in the same vein as his novels, but it also shows him to be a writer equally at home in the future and in nonhistorical fantasy. Here are three highlights.

"The Golems of Detroit" is the opening to *The Narrows,* but this relatively brief vignette, which, in the context of the novel, serves to set the scene and introduce the main characters, takes on a haunting and suggestive power when read in isolation, as a short story. All the themes of the novel are present, but in concentrated form, full of potential energy, like bombs waiting to explode. There is a literal explosion of sorts, as a young factory worker, Jared, wrestles with the implications of impending fatherhood while he and his fellow workers assemble the golems that will be sent to Europe to fight the Nazis, but the real punch of the story comes in the last line, which works beautifully to set off a second explosion, silent and lingering in its echoes,

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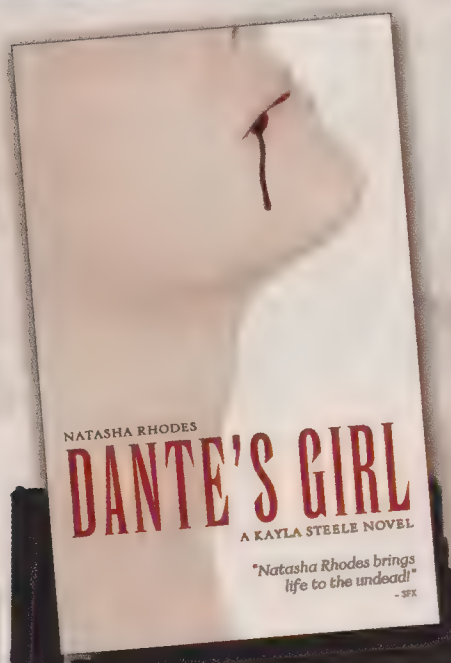

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the kind that the stories of Raymond Carver sometimes achieved.

In "For Now It's Eight O'Clock," Irvine takes an old nursery rhyme literally and portrays a town whose children have been abducted by the otherworldly sprite known as Wee Willie Winkie. Two men, bent more on revenge than rescue, wound the creature, which bleeds an assortment of childhood toys as it retreats to its lair. Trailing it there, the men find more than they bargained for. Funny, weird, and thoughtful, this story showcases Irvine's magpie talent, his penchant for building his fictions out of unexpected, surprising sources.

The World Fantasy Award-nominated "Gus Dreams of Biting the Mailman" is a shaggy-dog tale of abstruse philosophical speculation and drug-inspired slacker BS that might have been written—and perhaps in some alternate reality was written—by Philip K. Dick.

Three Days to Never, Tim Powers, William Morrow, New York, hardcover, 432 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 0-380-97653-6.

And speaking of Tim Powers, *Three Days to Never,* the latest from this master of gonzo fantasy and supernaturally flavored secret history, features a time machine that is partially powered by the footprints Charlie Chaplin left in the concrete outside Grauman's Chinese Theater in 1928. The rest of the machine depends on certain occult discoveries of Albert Einstein, who, as it turns out, when informing FDR of the possibility of an atomic bomb, was actually giving up the less dangerous of two technologies derived from his researches into the nature of space and time.

Three Days takes place during the 1987 Harmonic Convergence, in a California that is perhaps just a sliver of dimensionality removed from our own, in a world that is itself clearly similar but not identical to the one depicted by Powers in his previous novel, the monumental *Declare,* a supernatural thriller that may be his best work so far, which is saying something. *Three Days* doesn't come up to that level, but it's a breezily effective romp, a minor production on the order of the author's 1988 novel, *Earthquake Weather.*

Two spirits preside over the novel. The first, present through quotes both external to and embedded within the narrative, is Prospero, the old master sorcerer and wise father figure of Shakespeare's last masterpiece, *The Tempest.* The second, clearly meant to be seen as a Prospero-like figure, is Einstein himself, who, through a little genealogical sleight of hand, turns out to be related to various characters in *Three Days*—I'll leave it to readers to untangle the hows and whos of these relationships.

The plot involves a race to reassemble Einstein's time machine, which not only enables someone to travel back in time but to change history ... or even erase it entirely. The two main characters, Frank and Daphne Marrity, a father and daughter whose already close bond is enhanced by a kind of telepathy, find themselves pursued by two groups well versed in magical and extrasensory spycraft: the good guys, from a branch of Mossad, and the bad guys, in the employ of an ancient entity more secretive still.

Frank and Daphne are appealing characters, but the most interesting by far is a blind femme fatale named Charlotte, an agent of the baddies who can see through the eyes of others. Charlotte is fixated on the idea of using the time machine to return to the moment she lost her vision in a freak accident and changing that moment and everything subsequent to it. Since every act she has committed since then will be not merely erased, but as if it had never happened at all, she is able to convince herself that there are no moral factors or consequences to her actions, up to and including the cold-blooded murder of innocents. *Three Days* is at its most gripping when Charlotte is on the scene, and as the book unfolds, her importance grows, as if Powers himself was gradually seduced by this beautiful monster. ❧

Paul Witcover

HERE, THERE BE DRAGONS

Author and illustrator James A. Owen has taken on the daunting task of telling a thrilling adventure story with its roots in the best of fantasy fiction and mythology in *Here, There Be Dragons* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 326 pp., hardcover, $17.95). A professor's murder in 1917 London brings together John, Jack, and Charles, three Oxford men, and sends them on a journey through the Archipelago of Dreams. (Much of the publicity on this book has revealed the full names of these three characters, but I prefer not to ruin the surprise for those not in the know.)

The story revolves around the *Imaginarium Geographica,* an ancient book filled with maps of all the lands that have existed in myths, fairy tales, fables, and legends. Evil forces are determined to steal the book and wipe out all of these fantastic places. Our three characters, with the help of an eclectic cast of characters—Tummeler the talking badger, the Green Knight, and even Captain Nemo—search for the evil Winter King and his denizens before they can destroy the world of imagination and the "real" world as well.

This book is being marketed to young adults, but adults will take even more pleasure in reading it and discovering all the allusions to the best of fantasy fiction—Lewis Carroll, Jules Verne, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and others. Older teens who are well-versed in fantasy literature will also enjoy this hunt, and younger kids will just enjoy the story on its face value. It is well written, fast-paced, and very exciting; it may give J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series a run for its money.

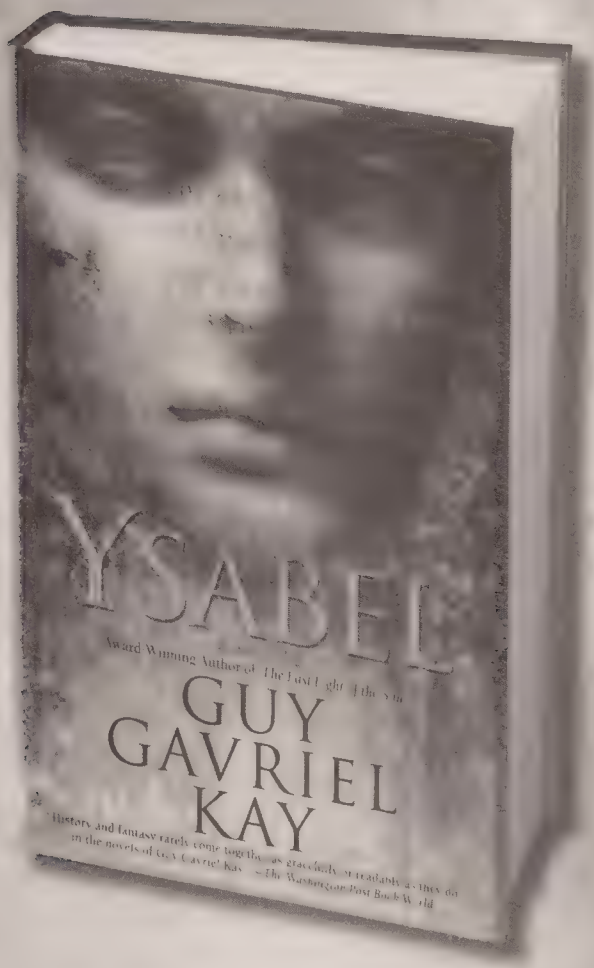
James A. Owen, best known for his Starchild graphic novel series and the Mythworld series of novels, is also designer and editorial director of *International Studio* and *Argosy* publications. His black and white illustrations are as enjoyable as the story, bringing to mind illustrations from books such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wind in the Willows.*

Here, There Be Dragons has already had several printings, and it has been optioned by Warner Bros. for a feature film. It is just the first of a series, and its fans, myself included, will be waiting impatiently for the next installment. ❧

Laura Cleveland

History and fantasy converge...

From the bestselling author of *The Last Light of the Sun*



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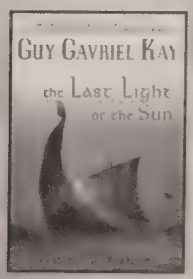

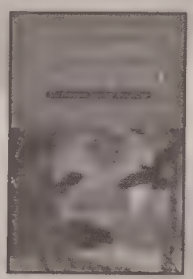

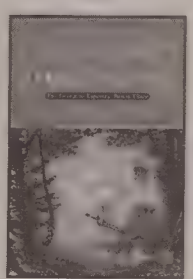

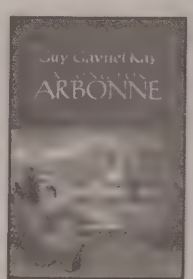

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A Touch of Hell

It's pretty rare to encounter an ogre wearing a kimono. It's even rarer when you don't get eaten. The wise ancient Japanese paranormal investigator will pay close attention.

By Richard Parks
Illustration By
Tiffany Prothero

ANY SENSIBLE PERSON WOULD HAVE MANY CRITICAL THINGS TO SAY of Kenji the priest: He drank too much. He didn't bathe often, ritually or otherwise. His understanding of and devotion to the Eightfold Way was dubious at best. Yet let it never be said he couldn't recognize the obvious.

"Yamada-san, you look terrible."

Kenji kneeled, grinning, in the doorway to my rooms, neither quite in nor quite out, much like his relative position on spiritual matters. The open door let in a shaft of light, illuminating an empty sakè cask, the remnants of my last drinking cup—smashed when I finally realized that the cask was empty—and me, lying on top of some not very clean bedding. I groaned and tried to sit up, but the room was still spinning too much. I settled for groaning again.

"Who let you in?"

"And a cheery good morning to you as well. The Widow Tamahara saw no need to announce me, since we're old friends."

"I've known you a long time. It's not the same thing."

Kenji had a more proper Buddhist name he'd been given when he'd become a priest, but he didn't use it. His priest-name was something pure and pious, no doubt, which were attributes I could never quite associate with Kenji.

He grinned. "Even so," he said, and then the grin went away and he went on, "It doesn't help, you know. The sakè, I mean."

I tried to sit up, but had to move slowly. My head felt like a blowfish looks. "What do you want? I know you didn't come here to lecture me on the evils of drinking, you of all people."

"You need employment, if nothing else to pay for these elegant quarters and more useless drink. I may have something for you."

These "elegant quarters" consisted of two shabby rooms in the compound adjoining the drinking establishment that the Widow Tamahara ran near the Gion Shrine. Nothing elegant about either my quarters or the Widow Tamahara, truth be told. Still, there was music in summer, sakè was never too far away, and it certainly beat living in the streets of Kyoto. Which, truth again admitted, I was one more late rent payment away from.

"I'm listening."

"An old friend of mine named Saigyo is now the abbot at Kokusho-ji, a temple near Mount Oe. I trust you've heard of it."

"There are temples beyond counting, but Mount Oe? Certainly."

Indeed, who had not? That area along the northwest road was famous for being infested with ogres from legendary times, though none had been reported in the area since the Emperor Ichijù ordered the hero Minamoto no Yorimitsu to clear the mountain of them some fifty years or so before.

"Saigyo says an ogre now haunts a section of the Tambakaido near Kokusho Temple. It's made travel through that area somewhat difficult. He's aware of your reputation and contacted me to employ you."

I shielded my eyes against the fierce morning sun. "Me? Why doesn't he petition the Imperial Government for aid? Keeping order along the roads is its concern."

"Such petitions take time, Yamada-san. Especially with the turmoil within the Court of late."

"Assuming I was foolish enough to challenge an ogre, how would I be paid? In prayers for my soul? Granted, there's a good chance I would need them."

Kenji just pulled a small black cloth bag out of his robe and dropped it on the wooden floor beside my bedding. Since my head was throbbing, the clinking sound the bag made was at once too loud and yet pleasant. I opened the bag to find thirty knife-shaped Chinese bronze coins and one sliver about half the length of my middle finger that looked like and probably was pure gold.

"Your temple seems to be doing rather well for itself," I said.

"You must understand that Saigyo is from a well-to-do family. More, he is not acting in his role as abbot, but rather in aid of his former brother-in-law, Minamoto no Tetsuo. Tetsuo is the provincial governor; since the ogre's presence has cut off traffic along the road and therefore the fees that Tetsuo is authorized to collect, he's been especially hurt by the ogre's presence."

"'Former' brother-in-law?"

"Yes. He was married to Saigyo's youngest sister, Hanako. Sadly, according to Saigyo's letter, Hanako died over a month ago. I knew her, Yamada-san. She was ... a lovely young woman."

There was doubtless a story hidden in the way he said her name, but that didn't concern me. I picked up one of the coins; there was no mistaking the feel of a good bronze coin. I put it back. "It seems rather odd to me that your friend would go to such trouble to help a man with whom he has no more family connections."

Kenji sighed. "I have only my friend's letter and this partial payment, of which, let it be said, I have already removed a small fee. You'll receive as much again if you succeed, and I'll want a token of that as well. As for the details, you can ask Saigyo and Tetsuo yourself after we arrive."

Perhaps it was the glare of light through the doorway, but I only then realized that Kenji was dressed in his traveling clothes, and at his side was the sort of straw hat that the monks favored. "We? I haven't even said that I was going yet."

"It's either face the ogre or stay here and starve or, worse, run out of sakè. Or do you have a better offer?"

"No," I said, because it was so.

Kenji nodded. "Then you're going. Now stop wasting our time and get up. The sooner you make ready, the sooner we can be off."

I got up, because of course he was right.

WE WERE BARELY PAST THE NISHI GATE OF KYOTO and rapidly approaching a dangerous, haunted region. Beside the area's reputation for ogres, the mountains were also home to several ancient tombs and burial mounds containing ghosts from a time no one could remember. While most of the area's reputation dated from the period of the ogres, there were other dangers. Bandits were rare these days but not unknown, and even they were not necessarily the worst thing one might meet on the road.

Even so, it was hard to think of that when one considered the pure beauty of the area. Mountains rose to either side of us; the region was known for its forested hillsides and deep, shaded valleys. The air was cool and clean, and frankly, a pleasant change from the smokes and odors of Kyoto. If it wasn't for the little matter of an ogre waiting for me at the end of it, I might have enjoyed the journey.

"Did you bring it?" I asked finally.

"Bring what?" Kenji asked, all innocence.

He wasn't fooling me. Unlike a ghost, an ogre was a physical being and had to be destroyed by physical means which, considering how strong and fierce ogres were, was no easy task for seasoned warriors and a suicidal one for a man alone. Like the hero Yorimitsu himself, I was going to need some assistance.

"Kenji, as far as I'm concerned that 'token fee' you took from Saigyo's payment went to cover this. Either show me what you've brought or I turn back now."

"Oh, very well." Kenji pulled out something that resembled, and likely was, no more than a long slip of paper with some writing on it, tied in a single knot as lovers sometimes did. He handed this to me.

"This is an excerpt from a Holy Sutra, a passage of such pure, ethereal truth and virtue that something as coarse as an ogre cannot discern it. As long as you have this on your person and don't fart or trip over a rock, you should be able to take the beast by surprise."

"I'll be invisible?"

"Invisible and inaudible," Kenji said with a touch of pride. "It won't even be able to hear your voice, though it can hear any other noise you make. The effect will last until you strike, then violence will negate the purity of the sutra. Needless to say, make your first blow a good one."

The talisman wasn't a guarantee, but it was an advantage and that was what I needed. I very carefully put the paper away. The sun was approaching zenith and Kenji shaded his eyes.

"I received my initial training at Kokusho-ji after I was given to the temple; it was often necessary to travel between there and the Capital. If I recall right, there's a stream and small waterfall not too far from here, though not that many people know of it. It would be a good place to rest and have a bite."

I followed Kenji off the road at a place that might have been a path but really looked more like a slight gap in the trees. Yet the way was clear and before long I heard the sounds of a waterfall. I also heard something else. A glance at Kenji showed that he had heard the same thing—the unmistakable music of female laughter.

"It seems this place is not quite so unknown as you thought."

Kenji just grinned and plunged ahead at a trot. I sighed and followed at a more leisurely place. I arrived at the pool to be greeted with the following tableau: Kenji standing just at the edge of the water and beyond him two naked young women clinging to each other in the deepest part of the pool just beyond where the mountain stream feeding the pool splashed down from the hillside.

From their clothes draped neatly over a pair of bushes on the opposite shore, it was obvious that they were two young and perhaps foolish peasant girls from some nearby village or farm. Still, their rustic origins seemed to have done them no harm: their hair was long and black, their skin the color of golden straw in autumn. Their lithe bodies were demurely veiled by the water, but only just, and they indeed made a lovely sight.

They looked at us with the appropriate mixture of surprise and apprehension, but their dark eyes did not agree with what their faces were telling us.

"Ladies, have no fear—" Kenji began, but I interrupted him.

"Ladies," I said, "you're wasting your time. This alleged monk has no piety to tempt, and as for me, I barely have any soul left at all worth mentioning."

One of the women actually snarled at me. In another instant they disappeared under the water, nimble as a pair of minnows. There was a ripple and splash on the opposite shore as two red fox vixens emerged from the pool, shook off the water, and vanished into the trees. Their clothes, of course, had disappeared; they were never really there.

Kenji stared at me. "They ... foxes? How did you know?"

I shrugged. "Let's just say I've gotten better at spotting them over the years. So. Will you unpack the rice cakes or shall I?"

Kenji went searching through his pack, muttering all the while. I skirted the edge of the pool to the waterfall, caught some of the splashing water in my hands, and drank. It was clean and cold and, unlike the women, very real. Still, I found myself wishing there was enough magic clinging to the place to transform the water to wine. I put the thought away.

By the time I returned, Kenji had the rice cakes arranged on a small cloth and had already eaten one. I took a couple for myself. While I ate I noticed Kenji staring wistfully at the water.

"I suppose I should thank you," he said. "Yet, honestly, what's the worst that could have happened?"

"They might have kept you entranced with their lovely selves for an afternoon from your perspective, only to discover that, back on the road, several hundred years had passed. Or ..."

"Or?"

"Or they might have been bathing together in human form for a lark, and been so very angry at being disturbed that they would have killed and eaten you and left your bones to molder at the bottom of this pool."

"Oh." Kenji seemed to consider this. "I'm not so keen on that option. Still, maybe it would have been worth the risk to find out."

"Not for me," I said. "I don't trust anything that can change at a whim."

"Then you don't trust human beings in general," Kenji said.

I had no argument with that. "Certainly not. Why would I trust any creature that can take a perfectly useful form of its own and let jealousy change it into, say, a snake?"

Kenji frowned. "I knew about foxes, of course, but a human transformation? I thought that was just a legend."

"Why? Doesn't your own tradition tell of a once-pious monk who was so overcome with lust for the daughter of an Emperor that he changed into a rat? Some emotions are too powerful for a human form to contain."

Kenji had just taken a big bite of one of the rice cakes and he chewed, looking thoughtful. "I assume you're referring to the story of the priest Raigo of Mii Temple," he said when his mouth was no longer quite so full. "That's just a story they tell to frighten the young monks."

"Suit yourself. Go seduce those foxes, for all I care. Just don't complain to me when one gets annoyed and bites your manhood off."

Kenji turned a little pale. "I think perhaps we should get back on the road."

"Only if we wish to reach Mount Oe sometime before next winter."

DESPITE ONE OR TWO OTHER DISTRACTIONS, WE finally reached the temple on the misty slopes of Mount Oe. As was the custom, the temple compound commonly sheltered travelers and we were shown to rooms that, while spare, were far better than my own lodgings in Kyoto. We were, so far as I could see, the only guests. After we had been fed and otherwise attended, Kenji disappeared for a little while and I used the time to massage my aching feet before he returned.

"Master Saigyo has requested that we join him on the temple grounds. There's a lovely moon tonight, or so he says."

I nodded, a little relieved. I had feared that I might be forced to endure a more formal audience, but the choice of venue seemed to imply that the abbot was more concerned with business than ceremony. That, and we would be much less likely to be overheard. At least, so I hoped and so it proved.

We found the abbot on the northern slope bordering the temple. Two stone lanterns marked a path leading farther up the mountain and there Saigyo waited for us.

There was, indeed, a lovely full moon rising and Master Saigyo, after introductions, invited us to join him in viewing it. While Master Saigyo studied the moon and Kenji pretended to, I studied Master Saigyo as much as courtesy allowed. He was around Kenji's age, maybe not yet fifty, a heavy-set man who bore himself in a manner that suggested he was used to being obeyed. Other than that, his face was as impassive as that of the moon above.

> The creature seemed small for an ogre, perhaps no more than seven feet tall, and definitely female....

Kenji was the first to speak. "I only recently learned of the death of your youngest sister, Master Saigyo, or I would have written sooner. She was a sweet and gentle soul and I grieve with you."

There was, perhaps, the flicker of a smile on the abbot's face. "Thank you, old friend. We know that death is inevitable in this world yet each loss still feels like a blow, and a blow hurts. Yet we should not bother our guest with such things. Yamada-san, I must thank you again for coming. Daisho speaks well of you."

It took me a few moments to remember that "Daisho" was Kenji's proper name as a priest. I resolved to remember it only so long as necessary.

"No doubt my friend praises me far past my worth," I said, "but I will do what I can. If I may, I would like to ask a few questions."

"We had thought the time of the ogres had passed around Mount Oe," Saigyo said, looking resigned. "And yet here we are again. I will, of course, answer any question I can."

"To begin, where was the ogre first seen and when did it first appear?"

"By the large fallen stone that some refer to as 'the Weeping Woman.' Kenji, I'm sure you know the one I mean."

Kenji nodded. "It's just out of sight of the border post farther west. Well known in the area, though I'm sure my friend has not heard of it." He turned to me, and I acknowledged that I had not.

The abbot continued, "I know the answer to the second question quite well. The first reported sighting was six weeks ago."

Kenji frowned. "But that was ..." He didn't finish.

Master Saigyo nodded somberly. "Yes, old friend—that was the day Hanako died. Forgive me for the vagueness of my letter, but it seems it was the ogre that slew her, and now wears her kimono as a trophy. Perhaps you can understand why I did not wish to wait for the Emperor's justice."

When our audience with Saigyo was concluded, rather than returning to our rooms, I asked Kenji to take me to the section of road where Hanako had been killed, and as Master Saigyo said, the ogre still lurked. Kenji agreed, although reluctantly.

"Don't worry; I do not intend to challenge the beast tonight. I just

want to have a look around."

The moon was past its zenith but there was still a fair bit of light on the road, and I was counting on that. We stopped at the border crossing where a rather scruffy—and sleepy—looking watchman made us state our business before waving us through. He muttered something about "sending the priests to pick up our pieces in the morning" that he didn't think we heard, but otherwise made no objection. After that Kenji and I had the road to ourselves.

Kenji was nervous. I would have enjoyed that more if I wasn't feeling somewhat the same. I broke the silence. "Why do they call the rock 'the Weeping Woman'?"

"Legend has it that, in times past, a woman traveler was murdered by bandits at the foot of the rock, and that her despair and anger at her fate trapped her soul there in the stone, where she weeps and bemoans her fate to this day."

"Is it true?"

"It's a story," Kenji said. "The rock does appear to weep, but this section of the road is prone to mists and fog. It might just be water collecting on the stone."

"For a priest who specializes in talismans against spirits and demons you seem very reluctant to draw the obvious conclusion," I said.

"Because the obvious conclusion is so often the wrong one. Don't mock me, Yamada-san. You know it's true. Ah. Softly, now. We're getting close," Kenji said.

At this point the road was practically carved out of the mountainside, with a sheer drop into darkness below on the left and a nearly vertical cliff face above to the right. No wonder the ogre was causing so much trouble—with a little time and preparation a mere handful of men could hold the road here against an army. One could well imagine how impassable the presence of an ogre made it.

"There it is," said Kenji in a harsh whisper.

At first I thought he meant the ogre, but I soon realized he was pointing at the rock. Apparently a section of granite had broken off the mountainside some time in the distant past and landed upright there at the edge of the roadway nearest the mountain. The "Weeping Woman" was about seven feet wide and twice as high, from my reckoning. I thought of Kenji's story and realized that, indeed, it would make a very good spot for an ambush; two or three armed men could easily lurk behind it, unseen.

Or one ogre.

I started to move closer, but Kenji grabbed my arm. "What are you doing?" he whispered. "I thought you didn't mean to confront the beast tonight?"

"I want a better look so I can plan my attack. Besides, it can't see me, remember? I'll be careful."

I hadn't gone more than ten steps when the ogre appeared and I stopped short. I assumed it had slipped out from behind the rock, but either it was extremely fast or the light wasn't quite as good as I thought, since I did not see it do so. One moment it wasn't there, and the next it was. Most definitely.

The creature seemed small for an ogre, perhaps no more than seven feet tall, and definitely female, or at least a grotesque parody of one. Its hair was long and coarse, its mouth distorted by two upward-turning tusks like those of a boar. It wore a ragged blue kimono rather incongruously covered in a design of little pink peonies. The kimono did not fit and was torn in several places, revealing the creature's withered dugs and most of her limbs. It was at once extremely fierce looking and somehow pitiable as it looked down the road. A breeze along the road brought the faint smell of death.

Using Kenji's talisman as cover, I moved slowly forward, careful to be as silent as possible. I noted that the Weeping Woman was very rough and broken on the side nearest the road.

The beast has to sleep sometime.

I thought, perhaps, if I could come back during such a time I might be able to climb to the top of the stone and later take the beast unawares from above, but I needed a better look at the stone. I moved forward but now off to the left side of the road to give the ogress a wider berth. I was no more than about thirty feet from the creature now, and it was only the certainty of Kenji's talisman that let me dare approach so close.

The ogress looked at me. Not at where I was, not in the direction of some inadvertent sound I had made, because I had moved as silently as a shadow. No. The creature looked directly at me. I didn't even have time to react before the beast took four giant strides and stood in front of me, looking down. Only then I noticed its fingernails were talons fully six inches long.

One of her talons brushed my cheek, drawing blood. And then she shook her massive head. "You're not him. Go away!"

She shoved me back. Not struck, not impaled, shoved. I practically flew several feet before landing, sprawling, not five feet from where I'd left Kenji moments before. It was a few more moments before I could force my tortured lungs to breathe again; the front of my body felt like one enormous bruise and, despite the need, it was even longer before I could even attempt to rise. When I did, Kenji was there to help me up.

"Kenji you worthless—" I started, but found I still did not have enough wind in me to curse him.

"Yamada-san, I swear. It should have worked! Why didn't it work?"

He sounded as puzzled as I felt. While I was angry enough to kill him I decided that could wait until later. I got my sword out as best I could, swearing that I would at least try to meet the ogre's next attack on my feet.

The attack did not come. The ogre was nowhere to be seen.

I lowered my blade, feeling foolish. After a moment I put it back in its scabbard. "Kenji, please explain yourself."

I don't think he was even listening. He stared at the rock called the Weeping Woman, and he was shaking. "That kimono belonged to Hanako— It was a gift from me for her wedding day. She must have been wearing it when she ..." He didn't finish. There were tears in his eyes, though of rage or grief or both, I could not tell.

"I saw very clearly," I said, "since I was no more than three feet from the infernal thing. Master Saigyo spoke of funeral rites too, but no one told me that Hanako's body was not recovered. I just assumed that, apparently correctly, unless the ogre stripped her first and then discarded the body. Which an ogre would not do."

"Of course not! The ogre has certainly devoured her," he said. "Though there must be something yet remaining of poor Hanako other than her clothes; the place smells of death."

"So I noticed. While we're on the subject, why am I still alive? It's certainly no thanks to your sutra of 'pure, ethereal truth.'"

Kenji's rage seemed to abandon him. "Yamada-san ... I don't know what to tell you. I'm not above creating a fake talisman when there's no harm in it, but not when a man's life is at stake, and certainly not now! For Hanako's sake, I want that creature destroyed even more

"There is neither bribe nor reason that will persuade an ogre to be other than what it is."

than you do."

"What are you not telling me, Kenji?"

He scowled for a moment or two, then answered me. "I was in love with Hanako," he said.

I wasn't surprised. Something in the way he'd said her name before made me wonder. "Did Saigyo know? Or, for that matter, did Hanako?"

"Hanako never had reason to know. Saigyo knew, I'm sure," Kenji said. "Very little escapes him. Still, it was long ago. She was too young and her family would never have approved in any case, as I had nothing and was a priest besides. It was useless."

I knew a little of such things, unfortunately, and understood his pain, but just then what little strength was left to me faded out. I found a convenient stone and sat down. Kenji's talismans never failed, yet this one had. It made no sense. Many things made no sense. "Why am I still alive?" I repeated.

"I'm glad you are, but as I said, I do not know why my talisman failed."

I shook my head, though it took an effort. "That's a separate question—oh, believe me, I want the answer to that as well. I mean, why didn't the ogre kill and devour me? It had me, but it apparently didn't want me. Why?"

Kenji scratched his chin. "Perhaps, being a female ogre, it only eats women."

"Or perhaps it is not what we think it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever consider that the ogre may be Hanako herself? It would explain why she's wearing Hanako's clothes."

Kenji glared at me. "One of those 'transformations' you spoke of? Don't be absurd. I knew Hanako, Yamada-san. There was not a gentler spirit on this earth."

"Even a gentle spirit will turn, under the right conditions. Yet I cannot say that this is what happened here. Perhaps a few more details of Hanako's disappearance are in order. For example, what was Hanako was doing on the road unescorted in the first place? You know that is improper."

Kenji smiled a little wistfully. "That may be, but Hanako grew up along this section of the western road and had many friends along the route. She had gotten into the habit of calling upon them unescorted from the time of her childhood."

"But she was not a child. She was a respectable married woman of good family!"

Kenji sighed. "I don't dispute the point. I do dispute your theory of the ogre's nature. Or are you going to claim that what we both smell now is the scent of evening primrose?"

I sighed. "No. It is almost certainly a dead body."

"And if Hanako were an ogre and not in fact torn apart and devoured by one, would we now be exposed to the scent of her pitiful remains? How does your theory account for this?"

"It doesn't. Any more than it explains why your talisman failed. It seems we are both in need of greater understanding. I must speak to the unfortunate lady's husband."

IN THE END IT WAS NOT NECESSARY TO ARRANGE AN audience with Minamoto no Tetsuo. On the afternoon of the second day after the incident, when I was somewhat recovered from my injuries, he came to see me at Kokusho-ji. Master Saigyo himself made the introductions in my rooms and then discreetly withdrew.

Tetsuo was a handsome young man, perhaps in his late twenties. His clothing was extremely fine, considering his position in what amounted to a provincial backwater, but I knew that a man's current position in the Imperial hierarchy didn't always reflect either his family's true influence or his own future prospects. He seemed a bit stiff and nervous but no more than the circumstances would dictate.

"I apologize for not seeing you at once, Lord Yamada, but the last of the funeral rites for my late wife required my attention. I've just come from the temple," he said.

"I had heard of your tragedy, of course," I said. "It is most unfortunate."

"Circumstances now in motion may conspire to compound my misfortune," he said. "Forgive my directness, Lord Yamada, but considering what I heard of your first encounter, I must ask if your resolve to slay the beast has weakened."

I almost smiled then. Most people who used my full title either didn't know any better or wanted something from me. I judged Minamoto no Tetsuo in the latter category.

"My resolve was never to slay the beast as such, Minamoto-sama, but rather to eliminate the problem. If killing the beast is the only way to do so, then yes, of course that is still my intent."

His relief was obvious. "Then it must be so, as there is neither bribe nor reason that will persuade an ogre to be other than what it is. The beast must be destroyed!"

"No doubt you are right. Still, I would like to ask you to clear up a few details. Your answers may help me deal with the beast."

"If I can help in any way. I confess that my own efforts to both seek revenge and do my duty as governor have come to naught. I cannot risk myself against the creature without the Emperor's permission and the *bushi* under my command have been worthless, I'm afraid, though they proved brave enough."

I nodded. I'd assumed that whatever force was available had already been tried, though this was my first confirmation of it. "Were there losses?"

He grunted. "Nothing but their pride, fortunately. Ten good men, and they bounced off the creature like hailstones, and doubtless inflicted less injury. Swords and arrows proved useless."

"Very curious. Ogres are known for their toughness, strength, and ferocity," I said. "But not for their restraint. The ogre's presence blocks traffic to the Tamba Road and travelers have been forced to seek alternate routes. Yet, except for your unfortunate wife, no one has been killed; not me, not even the men who attacked the ogre directly."

Tetsuo's face was as unreadable as that of a stone Buddha. "There is no doubt of the beast's capacity for murder. Perhaps it is mocking us. Or more likely we've simply been lucky so far, but such good fortune cannot last. Sooner or later more people will die."

"Of course you are right, but I must consider all possibilities. I gather it was your wife's habit to wander the Tambakaido alone?"

He sighed. "Please do not think ill of me, Lord Yamada. My late wife was devoted to me and was of a gentle and obedient nature in most respects, but the habits of her childhood were beyond either her or my power to break. I indulged her in this since the road has been considered safe since our grandsire's time and I saw no harm in it. I was wrong."

"No one blames you that I am aware of, Minamoto-sama. Yet you did speak of something 'compounding your misfortune.' May I ask what that is?"

Tetsuo looked decidedly uncomfortable. "I'm expecting a very important visitor from the Capital within the week, Lord Yamada, possibly within the next three days. It's imperative that the road be made safe before then."

I frowned. "From Kyoto? An Imperial Inspection?"

"No, Lord Yamada. Fujiwara no Hitomi. A noble lady and my future wife."

After Tetsuo left I went looking for Kenji and found him sitting in "meditation" in the gardens. Once I was certain he was snoring I shook him gently awake.

"I really don't know why you bother to go through the motions," I said. "You're not fooling anyone, and least of all Master Saigyo."

Kenji yawned. "Curse you, Yamada-san—that was a pleasant dream you just interrupted. What do you want?"

I passed on the news about Tetsuo's engagement and Kenji's face turned as hard and cold as a river stone. "We already knew why

Saigyo didn't wait for help; this simply explains why Tetsuo went along. He couldn't wait for the government either."

"You don't approve?" I asked.

"Officially, Tetsuo is a widower now, so there is no reason why he should not remarry. The timing of it is his business and no concern of mine."

"Say rather his family's business. Political matches, as this surely is, are arranged by the families involved. It's likely Tetsuo had no more say in the matter than you or I do."

"I know that," Kenji said. "And I can see that it's quite a coup, from the Minamoto standpoint, which perhaps explains the haste of it all. This marriage will create an alliance between Tetsuo's branch of the Minamoto and the Fujiwara of the Imperial Court. You're well aware of their influence, Yamada-san."

That was an understatement. "Indeed. I wager that Tetsuo won't remain a glorified border guard for much longer. Does Saigyo know, do you think?"

"Almost certainly, though he said nothing of it."

I considered. "Kenji, you lived here for some time. Is there any way to approach the stone called 'Weeping Woman' without using the road?"

"No ... oh, wait. Perhaps there is one. When I was an acolyte, there used to be a path along the mountainside that led to the cliffs above the stone. My friends and I would sometimes amuse ourselves by making wailing noises from above to frighten travelers as they went by. There is a way down to the road from there, but it was very treacherous and we seldom attempted it. I'm not sure the path still exists."

"If you still wish to avenge Hanako's death, then I suggest we find out. I don't need to reach the stone itself.

Kenji needed no more encouragement. As for myself, I was still very stiff and sore and not in the best of condition for clambering around a mountainside. Still, by this time there were at best three hours of daylight remaining, and for what I had in mind I would need every bit of it.

"Let's go," he said.

In the old days Kenji and his companions had scaled the west wall of the temple compound; we used the gate, which opened onto a thickly wooded hillside. Kenji considered for a moment, then said, "This way." I followed him as we skirted the outside wall. "There. That rock. The path turned here."

Kenji was apparently incorrect in his belief that the path was unused now; we hadn't gone too far before I found the imprint of a sandal on a mossy stone, but Kenji shrugged it off.

"Woodcutters and hunters come this way on occasion; I imagine it was one of them."

I knew the marks of a priest's clogs when I saw them, but I said nothing. True enough, the path clearly hadn't gotten a lot of use; on my own I would have lost the trail at any one of several points, but Kenji's memory led him unfailingly back onto the right way whenever the going got tenuous.

"Old pine tree ... bramble thicket, two white stones, one dark ..." he muttered to himself as one by one he noted the landmarks, always leading us higher. I glanced back once to appreciate the lovely view of the temple complex of Kokusho-ji, nestled as it was at the foot of the mountain.

"I can understand why you love this place so," I said.

He frowned. "Do not. Oh, it's nice enough, but if not for Saigyo I wouldn't come near the place. Too many bad memories. Old Daisho was a right bastard."

"Daisho? Isn't that the same as your priest name?"

He shuddered. "Please. That ancient cow dropping did that to me on his deathbed out of pure spite. He called such little flourishes "touches of hell." Like his beatings, or why ogres and demons are allowed to walk among us in the first place, as reminders of what is to come for the Unenlightened. He said I would never be a proper priest, and since he would soon no longer be a priest himself, there was no harm in giving his name to me."

"Was he wrong?" I asked, trying not to smile.

"It was still unkind of him to say so ... ah. Almost there."

Where we had been spiraling up along a steep slope, now Kenji led me on a precarious route down to where the footing suddenly ended. It was hard to see, since several saplings and vines had overgrown the edge. The sun was still in evidence but sinking fast; it would be below the mountains before much longer.

"The rock is just below," Kenji whispered. "If we keep quiet perhaps the ogre won't come up here after us."

"Has it left the road since it first appeared?" I asked softly.

"I don't know ... I don't think so. I believe Saigyo would have mentioned if the creature had been spotted anywhere else."

"Then the meal it made on Hanako must be long since passed through its stomach. I'd think we'd be dealing with one very hungry ogre, wouldn't you?"

Kenji frowned but said nothing. I carefully poked through the undergrowth at the edge, trying to get a clear view while making as little noise as possible.

"Kenji, this is your first chance to redeem yourself and show that my trust in you has not been misplaced."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I have to lean over the edge here to get a good view. I need you to hold on to my arms." I stretched both arms behind me as if being bound. Kenji took a firm grip on each of my wrists as I leaned out over the precipice and looked down. I thought that, perhaps, it wasn't so great a distance as a mountaintop, but still much farther than I would care to fall.

Kenji's left hand slipped just slightly and my heart hammered in my chest, but he adjusted his grip before I slipped any more. I took several deep breaths and made myself look straight down. I could see the top of the rock and the road on either side, but the ogre was nowhere in sight. I leaned out just a little farther and I could hear Kenji grunt.

"Please hurry, Yamada-san," he said in a harsh whisper, "you're not exactly a feather, you know."

"Just a little more ..."

Now the side of the rock nearest the cliff was visible, and I saw something huddled near the base. Not so large as an ogre and difficult to make out in the fading light. For a moment I ignored Kenji's straining and leaned forward as far as I dared, and it was finally enough.

"Pull me back, Kenji, if you please."

When we were both back on solid—if slanted—ground, Kenji collapsed back against the mountainside. "It's a good thing you spoke when you did; I'm not sure I could have pulled you back if you'd tarried any longer. Did you see what you wanted to see?"

"What I wanted to see? No, but it will do. Let's go back before you get us lost on this mountain. Tomorrow I'm going to need another talisman from you."

"Another ...? Yamada-san, I cannot in good conscience give you any more wards against the ogre without knowing why the first one failed."

"I said 'talisman,' Kenji-san. I didn't say anything about an ogre."

TETSUO AGREED TO MEET US ON THE TAMBA ROAD the following morning. It was early; I'd expected Kenji to show up bleary eyed and yawning but he surprised me. He was awake, dressed in clean robes, his head freshly shaven. We set out from the temple onto the road, walking briskly in the direction of the stone called the Weeping Woman.

"Are you sure you're Kenji and not some wandering spirit impersonating him? If so, you've got the dress and demeanor all wrong."

He grunted. "Very funny, Yamada-san. Time enough for the old Kenji later, perhaps. Right now it is my whim to look the part I play. But if you're correct, shouldn't Master Saigyo be present?"

"We'll all know soon enough if I am right or wrong, including Master Saigyo. Just be ready if you're needed."

"Depend on it."

The odd thing was, even though this was indeed the worthless monk Kenji, sometimes called Daisho, I knew in this that I could, indeed, depend on him. That was some comfort, and sorely needed. The next few minutes would tell the tale.

We arrived where Minamoto no Tetsuo waited for us with two attendants, about a bowshot from the stone.

"I am here as you requested, Lord Yamada, but what is this all about?" He looked puzzled, and just a bit suspicious. I didn't blame him, and immediately moved to put him at ease.

"Thank you for coming. I am happy to report that the Ogress of the Tamba Road is no more."

His expression immediately changed to near elation. "It's done? You've killed it?"

"The ogre is most certainly dead. Shall I demonstrate?"

I walked briskly toward the stone. Thirty yards. Ten yards. Five. One.

Nothing.

I reached out and placed my hand on the Weeping Woman. She was cold and wet to the touch. Weeping, as usual. Then I very deliberately turned my back on the stone and walked without even the vaguest hint of concern back to where Kenji and Tetsuo waited.

"Lord Yamada, I cannot thank you enough."

"I have been rewarded amply already," I said, "but I do have one small request."

"Name it," he said.

"Simply walk with me alone, for a bit. Ogres and all things spiritual and demonic are an interest of mine, and there are a couple of things about this one that still puzzle me, and I think perhaps you can make things clearer. If your men and you, Kenji, will pardon us for a moment?"

"Certainly," Kenji said, and there was a gleam in his eye I hope to never see again. Tetsuo instructed his escort to remain with Kenji and I put my hand on Tetsuo's shoulder and steered him back down the road toward the standing stone. If he took any notice of my familiarity with his person he didn't show it.

"You must admit there was some strangeness about the ogre," I said in a conversational tone, "It apparently never ate—except for your unfortunate wife—nor slept, nor even got bored and wandered off. Such are things you'd expect of a physical creature, even an ogre.

"I don't know the habits of ogres, Lord Yamada. I'm sorry, but I don't think I can help you."

We were no more than thirty feet from the stone.

"Oh, I must disagree. Since you're not familiar with the habits of ogres, perhaps you can be of assistance in questions of another nature. For instance, exactly when did Hanako become an inconvenience to you?"

His face went as blank as a mask. "I do not know what you are talking about." Tetsuo made as if to shrug me off, but I held firm.

"Oh, I doubt that. Now, those inclined to be charitable would say that your family learned of your loss and simply moved quickly to offer you the comfort of a new wife, but I have some sad experience of the Fujiwara and these negotiations are of a dynastic nature. They take time. There is simply no way that your marriage to Fujiwara no Hitomi could have been arranged in full since Hanako's death. This alliance was already in process."

"Lord Yamada, you do not understand."

We stopped then, no more than a few feet from the Weeping Woman.

"No? Then tell me you were not instructed to put Hanako aside in favor of Hitomi some time ago. It's not an uncommon thing to break one alliance to create a better one. But of course your family did not take Master Saigyo into account, which you knew was a mistake on their part. His family, while not as prominent as the Fujiwara, does have connections at Court. Not to mention his position as the spiritual master of this entire area. He could have made a great deal of trouble for you, had he decided that his sister had been ill-used."

"You are an interesting fellow," Tetsuo said. "And your reputation is, I see, well-earned. But I'd be careful not to let this idle conversation get out of hand, if you take my meaning."

"Do not worry. Why do you think I moved us out of earshot of anyone else? I'm well aware I have no proof of any of this. I'm not seeking proof. Call it a flaw in my character if you will, but I simply want to know the truth. So. Everyone knew of Hanako's habit of walking the Tamba Road unescorted. All you had to do was conceal yourself at the stone and wait for her to pass by. When Hanako's corpse was discovered there is no one who would doubt that she'd met with a bandit. No divorce necessary, and thus no insult to Saigyo's family. I must compliment you, Minamoto-san."

He smiled at me. "I would have scoured the countryside, left no cave or crevice unexplored," Tetsuo said. "Doubtless I could have found some likely peasant to execute."

"I thank you for your honesty, Minamoto-san. I think we can call our business almost concluded."

He grinned. "Almost? I said you didn't understand. You still do not. The ogre—"

"Was Hanako herself? Yes, I know. Did you cover your face? I suspect you did, but she recognized you anyway. The shock and betrayal she felt was such that it turned your kind and gentle wife into that ravening beast. You didn't anticipate that, and how could you? Such things are extremely rare. Yet you were now saddled with an even bigger problem, were you not? One that would grow far worse if anyone else guessed the ogre's true origin."

Tetsuo was smiling now. "I was wrong, Lord Yamada—you do understand." he said, "Not that this matters. You have slain the ogre and the final obstacle to my marriage is removed. Think what you will of me but consider this: if anyone's guilty of Hanako's death, you are. Please remember that fact if you ever think of telling tales."

"Oh, I will remember your words, I assure you. But I do have one correction to make—I didn't slay the ogre, Minamoto-san."

He frowned. "You didn't? But you said—"

"That the ogre was dead, and so it is. Only I didn't kill the ogre. You did."

The ogress began to shrink in on itself, the form becoming less tangible, more ghostly.

"Hanako...?"

"Was dying even as the transformation took place." I took my hand off Tetsuo's shoulder. "I think your late wife has something to say to you."

With the contact broken, Kenji's talisman that kept me hidden no longer shielded Tetsuo, and the Ogress of the Tambakaido appeared in front of Tetsuo in her full horrible glory. Tetsuo screamed and reached for his sword but it was far too late as the ogress embraced him, smiling a terrible smile.

"Anata ... beloved," the ogre said, and then she ate him.

There were shouts of consternation from Tetsuo's men but before they could reach us it was a moot point. In the end they simply watched, just as I did. While it was no pleasant thing to see someone being eaten alive—even someone like Tetsuo—I found myself observing with a sort of curious detachment as she tore the screaming man limb from limb and stuffed each bloody gobbet down her maw. I already knew that her ability to manifest physically was quite strong, but up until this point I hadn't known for certain exactly what she was going to do to him. Now I had my answer. Perhaps it wasn't the betrayal as such that drove the transformation, but rather the fear of loss.

She did love him. Despite it all

And now she loved each and every bite of him as Hanako possessed her husband fully and completely in the only way now possible for her, but the final outcome of the matter was not yet decided. When all that was left of Minamoto no Tetsuo was his sword and his sandals, I waited and watched, and in my own way, I prayed.

The ogress began to shrink in on itself, the form becoming less tangible, more ghostly. I did not know if such was possible; I had merely hoped. When all was done, I saw the image of a pretty young woman floating beside the rock, wavering and translucent as if her body was formed of mist. She looked confused.

"Kenji, now!"

"Exorcism is not needed, Yamada-san. She's done what she needed to do."

Kenji knew his business and proved correct. Hanako started to fade almost immediately, and in a few moments the ghost was gone. Kenji came and stood beside me, while Tetsuo's erstwhile escort merely stared at the place where their master had died.

"I will pray for her soul," Kenji said.

"There is a little more you can do for her, just now." I led him behind the stone where the full skeletal remains of a woman in a blood-stained blue and pink kimono lay slumped against the rock.

Kenji covered his face briefly with his sleeve. "Poor Hanako ... This is what you saw from the mountainside," he said to me.

I nodded. "That is also why your original talisman did not work. It was proof against a living ogre, not the ghost of one."

"And Tetsuo?"

"Just because the obvious conclusion is often the wrong one, that doesn't mean that it always is."

Kenji looked grim. "However much he just suffered, it was not enough."

I had no comment to make on that. "Kenji-san, if you would, please stay here and supervise the recovery of the body. I'm sure Tetsuo's former guard will be willing to assist you. Under the circumstances, Master Saigyo may wish to repeat the funeral rites."

"Of course, but where are you going?"

"To make my final report to Master Saigyo, of course. He is, after all, the one who hired me. I would not want him to think he had not received full value."

I FOUND SAIGYO IN THE TEMPLE PROPER, SEATED IN lone meditation before a statue of Thousand-Armed Kannon the Compassionate. An apprentice monk made to block the entrance but I brushed him aside and went to stand between the abbot and the goddess.

"Forgive my coarse presence, but I am pleased to report the removal of the ogre. I must add, regretfully, that Minamoto no Tetsuo is dead."

"That is ... unfortunate," Saigyo said. "I will pray for him."

"What will you pray, Master Saigyo? That Tetsuo be sent to the lowest, most vile hell there is?"

Saigyo smiled faintly. "I will pray for Tetsuo as I pray for all people—for the ultimate redemption of his soul. Sometimes an eon or two in hell is required if the sins weighing on a person are grave. That is for the King of Hell to judge and need not concern either of us."

"You knew that Tetsuo was responsible for your sister's death," I said.

"Say rather that I strongly suspected. As, apparently, did you. How did you discern the truth?"

"Starting in the same place you did— Kenji's mountain path. You were among the companions who once accompanied him on his pranks, weren't you?"

"'Among?' I was his primary accomplice. When I heard what had happened to Hanako, I thought I might somehow elude the ogre and recover whatever remained of my unfortunate sister before the funeral rites were concluded."

"You got farther down the cliff than I did, I wager, and then you saw what I saw—Hanako's body. Still clothed, even though the ogre was supposedly wearing her kimono. Also uneaten, unbroken, and practically undisturbed. That was not possible if Hanako had been killed by an ogre. The sensible conclusion was that she had not. You realized then what the ogre was, and could have chosen to exorcise the spirit straightaway. Instead you chose revenge and hired me as your instrument!"

Master Saigyo's voice was as soft as a cloud. "What should I have done, Yamada-san? Sent my unfortunate sister out of this world as a monster? This was not revenge—this was justice. And as to the ogre's nature, Kenji is a skilled exorcist and could have done the same. Yet when you came to suspect Tetsuo's guilt and the ogre's true nature, you yourself chose another path, or am I mistaken?"

"No," I said, "you are not."

I had no real quarrel with Saigyo. I had chosen to accept his coin and had in turn decided to avenge the death of Hanako, a woman I had never even met. Then I thought of the way Kenji spoke of Hanako and knew that meeting her wasn't necessary to understand what was justice and what was not. I felt my anger leaving me.

"As you said, there is justice in hell. That doesn't mean there should be none here," I said.

He smiled a little ruefully then. "You and Kenji will be returning to the Capital soon, I expect. See me in the morning for the balance of your payment, and so our business will be concluded. And yet I must still ask a favor of you."

"What is it?"

"If possible, please try to look after Kenji. At least a little."

I considered this. "Master Saigyo, forgive my bluntness, but you know as well as I that, aside from his specialist skills, Kenji is probably the worst excuse for a priest who ever lived. He drinks, he carouses, he studies scripture only to extract appropriate passages for use as talismans. And before you ask, no, I have not said anything to you now that I haven't said to his face, and worse besides."

"At least he does study scripture," Saigyo said without a trace of irony. He smiled then. "Yamada-san, I can't fault Kenji for his failures as a priest because he's not a priest. Not really. Poverty drove his parents to give him to the temple as a boy, whereas I chose to be here. I have been far luckier than Kenji in that I learned early on what I wanted and needed for my life's path. Kenji is still sorting that out for himself and doing the best he can along the way. He will manage, because he's better than you know. Come to that, he's better than he knows. Why do you think Master Daisho gave Kenji his own name?"

"To plague him?"

Saigyo smiled. "Well, that too. As our old Master was wont to say, 'A touch of hell is not always a bad thing.'"

"I'll see what can be done, but please understand that, come tomorrow, our accounts are settled. It's not because you asked me. It's because he's my friend, too."

Which was also true, much as I hated to admit it. The priests say that we seek what we require, even if we know it not. Perhaps Kenji did require "a touch of hell" and that was why he was my friend. Perhaps, in my own way, I required someone like Kenji. It occurred to me that a little hell was probably all I had to offer anyone.❧

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IN A WORLD SUFFUSED WITH MIRACLES AND HORROR, IT'S ALL TOO EASY TO BECOME INURED TO BOTH.

THE ROPE

A NEW TALE OF THE ANTIQUE LANDS

THE ROPE WAS BRAIDED OUT OF COMMON HALFA-GRASS, AS MANY ROPES ARE in the Antique Lands. It trailed from a low and broad basket, made of doum-palm fibers but unworthy of further remark. Some length of the rope lay coiled beside this basket. The other end of the rope, which had to be thought of as the far end, stood at present some fifteen yards distant. And this, as will be seen, was worthy of remark indeed.

The rope had been displayed in the Lower Ópetian port town of Noofr for five days now. Late each morning the blind old man who owned the basket set it in a broad sort of plaza that periodically filled up with tradesmen and merchants, forming near the ice manufactory an ephemeral *sooq* of goats, bitumen, fish, rice, and other regional produce. This place was more than broad enough for the rope to have been laid straight out in any direction without touching the wall of the native town, or that of the manufactory, had its owner chosen to do so. The old man, whom the people of Noofr came to call the little khedeev (that is, the little "ruler of Ópet"), chose not to do this.

The effect of this location, likely unintended by the old man, was also to keep the rope some distance from any building whose roof or window might have facilitated a closer inspection of the far end. The residents and visitors to the *sooq* were much inclined to attempt this, because from its coil beside the basket the rope rose straight into the air. And there was no yardarm or balloon tethered anywhere along its length.

Rope-charming is a profession not unknown in this part of the world, but it has never been a common one. Most rope-charmers will use cordage, thin rope or often ordinary cotton twine, not longer than five or six yards. (The precise length of the little khedeev's rope had not been determined, but its diameter was in excess of two inches.) Some rope-charmers use drums, and others reed pipes, to "draw up" the rope. The little khedeev used a side-blown ivory horn. From the embouchure of this unsophisticated instrument he forced a curious series of notes. These were themselves worthy of as much remark as the rope, on account of their duration, tonal achievements, and charming effects.

He also had a boy with him, as rope-charmers sometimes do. The boy was seven or eight years of age, black-haired, brown-skinned, and slender, a good Upper Ópetian type one might expect to see on a photographic cabinet card. Each day the boy swarbled up the rope. With him he dragged the attention of the crowd, away from the dusty street, away from their chores and labors. Away from the recently depopulated harbor, away from their worries about the real khedeev, who was very unpopular.

BY NOREEN DOYLE ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE

The khedeev was, in fact, so unpopular that two weeks prior to this day, while he visited abroad—and specifically on the very day he toured *L'Exposicion Grand* in Lutet—a minor uprising had disturbed Noofr. Several buildings had been set afire and certain people were beaten, threatened, or killed. This had precipitated both the departure of most of the foreigners by means of the tourist steamers operated by Baker & Son, and the arrival of a contingent of the khedeev's army, which had quickly brushed through and removed the offenders like nits on a louse-comb. These occurrences had left things in such a state that even the local population did not know what might happen next. Ever since, to whatever extent possible, the foreigners had stayed away, visitors and expatriates alike. A nebulous sense of worry hung over the town, except here in this plaza. The rope and the boy and the old man had become a sort of holy trinity, granting a bright daylight hour of relief from worldly cares.

Such ease of heart notwithstanding, rope-climbing boys do fall now and then, before they have had a chance to run away or grow too large in their proportions or be stolen away by some family member or slave-dealer. A bad note or rhythm from the rope-charmer's instrument, or a slip of a clumsy hand, can pluck him from the sky and send him back down, haste post haste, to the street. In such cases gravity proves the greater magic. Much more rarely, a boy neither descends the rope nor plummets from it. Now and then, it is said, a boy climbs up and up and up into the glare-gold of the sun, and never returns. It is supposed to be a rare and marvelous thing for a boy to be so pretty and so virtuous as to catch the fancy of God. (It being usually difficult to maintain both states simultaneously.)

But in the event that this boy fell, he would not lie on the streets to be picked over by thieves. In the shadow of a mendicant eye-surgeon's awning, a young woman of Lower Ópet named Iánheh tá-Heybesi waited, ready to fetch his body to Temple servants who would properly entomb him. This was not her usual employment. She was, in fact, the vaccinator's daughter, although Iánheh herself had no deep interest in the science of inoculation and these days earned a modest income as a dragoman, guide, and interpreter for foreigners who found themselves in Noofr. Her current role of jackal was occasioned by the recent events. These had deprived Iánheh of her customary clientele, and few of the local population

AS THEIR BREATHS CAME OUT FILLED WITH URGENCY AND PRAYER TIMED TO THE RAPID CADENCE OF THEIR HEARTS, O GOD! O GOD!, THEIR HANDS WENT OUT, COLLECTIVELY.

knew quite what to do with her (her father being in Lutet with the khedeev at the time). During the minor uprising, which earned several column inches in local and foreign newspapers and halftones in those that had the apparatus, the vaccinator's house had burned down.

The servants of the Temple did not particularly care about Iánheh's politics (they were anyway awaiting the return of the great eminence called the Sole of God), or even her religion (she wore the white and yellow *qafiyeh* that marked her as one of the *kópees*, who worship a multiplicity of powers rather than exclusively the sun, which is called God in the Antique Lands). In return for the boy's body, and thereby his soul which the servants of God would press into duty, they would give her something to eat.

By this time, Iánheh had come, somewhat unhappily, to the conclusion that the boy was not going to be providing her dinner. At least it was fortunate for him. But Iánheh had waited five days for his consequences and, as her own consequence, had gone rather hungry.

There was today other game afoot here, and Iánheh finally decided to pursue it. Like Iánheh, the other people of Noofr had been watching this performance for five days and had grown just a little tired of it. More strangers, for whom the rope remained yet a novelty, made up the crowd now. While there were no foreigners from beyond the Antique Lands, the various nations (if they may be so called) within the Antique Lands, and the forty-two provinces of Upper and Lower Ópet, were well-represented. Someone might need a desert guide, when the performance was finished. Iánheh knew the routes. She had followed her father's inoculation rounds for many years.

A well-bearded man of Qinahni found himself in her aim. He had crossed the Crocodile Canal (Noofr stands at its northern entrance) into Ópet, and had earlier remarked to the eye-surgeon that he was bound next for Qáriyá, grandest city in Ópet and, by certain accounts, in all the world.

"Yá sáyeed," Iánheh said, approaching, "the roads from Noofr are not as felicitous as those that bring a man here. A *móteneet* would smooth your path, keep dogs from your shadow, ensure water for your horse, or find you a horse if you have none." She used a common word for desert guide in the language of the *kópees*, who are famed and prized for remaining loyal to their employers.

Her lineage and its accompanying reputation did not impress the Qinahnite. He continued to stare in the direction of the boy, pulling in the flowing sleeve of his embroidered cotton robe so that it did not stray too near her body. "Where are your foreign masters gone off to, girl? Swim after them!"

Attempts upon several others likewise brought rejection, if not so cruelly. Iánheh's usual services were evidently of no greater use today than her unusual ones. She said to herself, "My father will return from Lutet soon. But not so soon that I can wait for him without eating."

She had one last salvaged morsel, a fig, slightly charred. Before making a meal of it, she made it vanish and appear at turns by sleight-of-hand. Her father had taught her these tricks, for the amusement of those children to whom he administered in his inoculation duties. The fig walked the back of her hand, was reborn from an old woman's ankle ("Here is your last-born, *sáyeeda!* May it grow to bear you many fruit that those who crouch in your shade might share!"), disappeared into thin air—O no, there it was, beneath Iánheh's *qafiyeh*.

Was the honest *leger-de-man* of this female adept any less wonderful than the tricks of the rope-climbing boy? Taking away the wonder of the rope and installing him upon an ordinary pole of no great height, certainly not. Regarding more passive aspects of their presentations, ornamental as the boy was, Iánheh was herself a reasonably attractive specimen of a Lower Ópetian type (with even a few red hairs among her dark brown ones, barely numerous enough to suggest a latency of mischief to anyone who came close enough to notice them). But as this boy was now, a pretty Upper Ópetian appended to an untethered rope that had risen to a very respectable height, he was a creature of air, an occasion of contemplation and joy. Iánheh might as well have been a snake in the dust of the earth, the bystanders accorded her such notice.

"How high the boy has climbed! O God! O God!" one onlooker remarked to the next. "How marvelous the little khedeev's magic is! Will it happen today? Will God take him?"

From their hands rained *báqsheesh* in the form of coins and, among them, a copper bracelet, these puddling before the crossed legs of the blind rope-charmer. The bracelet was thin and green with age. Iánheh thought, "That is nothing more than a scrap, an insult, a bruise upon the flesh of his poor purse! What will the old man do with such a thing? But I know the sort of foreigner who'd buy it. The

foreigners will come back. Their winters will grow cold again and they'll forget about the uprising—even if I won't—and remember only Ópet's warm breezes and *anteekehs.*"

The bystanders craned their necks heavenward, looking holy in contemplation of God as the Temple horologues sang the noon hour. By now the boy had gone higher than they had ever before seen any boy climb on such a rope. He had to be nearly at the far end, the very end. Everyone—Iánheh not excepted—drew a loud breath. The boy fumbled for his hold as he had never done before, and was pendant from the rope by one hand only. Everyone—even those who had grown bored with the performance—watched now.

As their breaths came out filled with urgency and prayer timed to the rapid cadence of their hearts, O God! O God!, their hands went out, collectively. Everyone—Iánheh not excepted—tipped or flicked their wrists or bent down to put their hands before the old man. The little pile of *báqsheesh* grew, despite all things, larger than before. But their eyes still attended the boy. Now Iánheh was excepted, because she was examining the copper bracelet she had pinched from among the coins. And her neighbors ululated.

Iánheh leapt up. The rope stood there still, but the boy was gone from the end of it. Iánheh said to herself, "Where has he fallen to?" but the ululation was of overwhelming joy.

The boy was gone. He had climbed straight up to the sun. "O God! O God! God be praised! His presence fills my heart! O God! O God! What a blessed boy! What a fortunate boy, to be taken away by God! O God! O God!" People departed amid self-congratulations, saying, "Did you see? Yes? O how wonderful for you and your family, and me and mine. Yes, it is a blessing to witness such a miracle with one's own eyes, to have such manifestation of God's love to sate one's heart." They went away, thanking the little khedeev with gifts of even more coins.

Iánheh squinted into the sun as it continued on its way, her fingers feeling the edges of the bracelet. Foreigners would return for it. They would return for her, and her father would too and the khedeev would come back and everything would be as it had been, except for the house, which had burned to the ground.

She wondered if the boy might also return. She said to herself, "Did the sun god come for him as the unblinking eye of a falcon, or as a ball pushed along by a beetle, or as a golden boat? Or maybe, as the Temple servants say, as a flawless orb of light." And she wondered too, "Will the boy fall?"

AFTER A TIME SPENT SCRAPING THE COINS INTO A small cotton sack, and calling "Boy! O for a boy!" (to no effect except that in Noofr mothers attended their sons a little better from that time forward), the old man tucked in his legs. His spine jerked, and one might argue next whether his legs lifted him or whether something hauled him up by the shoulders. It was very much like watching a puppet as he wrenched himself from the ground. This, and his blindness, were why the bystanders of Noofr had named him the little khedeev.

The little khedeev set the ivory horn upright in his basket. Around it he proceeded to guide the rope into a coil. With the little sack inside too and the lid pinned into place, he shouldered this burden.

Iánheh ran before him, bowing. *"Yá sáyeed! Yá sáyeed!"* Then, in the language of the *kópees: "Ha niboo! Ha niboo!"*

"Yá! Yá!" said the little khedeev fearfully. Into his palm she pressed her last fig.

"Your boy is gone, *sáyeed,* taken by your God, and all the other boys have been all taken away by their mothers."

His long fingers curled around the scorched fruit. He squatted in the shadow of a house with no windows and, there, devoured it. *"Yá!* Sit here, sit here, *kópeet.* No one sits with me." The little khedeev rocked back and forth. "Do you think that a blind man among the sighted is like a foreigner among real people, needful of a dragoman? O I can discern what's about me, girl, very well indeed! I know what is in people's hearts and, most of all, what they lack. I hear it, I smell it, I feel it, I taste it. I provide it. In my yesterdays I had this horn and nothing else with which to accomplish this. From *sooq* to *sooq* I traveled—O I might have had a donkey from time to time, but that is all."

"No boy?"

"Not so much as a monkey!" He was smiling now, squinting as if to see something distant and bright. "Yesterday," the little khedeev said, "the rope danced along the ground. People came to marvel at it! For a long time this brought me *báqsheesh.* But then there came a day when nobody's heart was filled by this anymore. I pleaded, 'What displeases you, *sáyeed* and *sáyeeda?*' The reply was, 'Up the road is a foreign tsampouna-player who claims to have fitted his pipes to the bladder of the infidels' Good Lord, which he himself dug up out of a tomb. He's playing up his Lord's—— ! But your rope! It might as well be a snake!' I said, 'Well, who is to say that it will remain a snake?'

"People watched for a little while in hopes that something else might happen, then, when it didn't, went on to the tsampouna-player, or else to a man who served wine from the horn of the foreigners' Devil, or even to a woman who kept a lock of hair from our very Sole of God braided among her own. Then, one day as I played, the rope rose from the ground. People stopped to watch it for a while. In time it reached into the sky. People came from near and far to behold this rope emerging from its basket, drawing up and up and up! O how they loved this. For many years, so many years, this filled their hearts and my purse. But today! It is not yesterday anymore. Today most any creature with lips on his face and breath in his lungs may send string or cord or length of catgut into the air. People will gape and stare for a little while, but only if you put a monkey or, better, a boy on the rope. You might think that this satisfies them, and I forgive you for it, but they are not amazed, not by what they once were."

His legs thrust the rest of his body up again. He gathered the basket onto his back, and the sack of coins within it changled. "Enough of this place!"

"Where are you going, *sáyeed?*"

"Everywhere! Qáriyá, to Qáriyá."

Iánheh walked beside him, warding dogs and sheep from his path. "You'll need a *móteneet,* surely, at least for a little while. And what will you do without a boy? I believe that nobody in Noofr will give you one. Who will stare at your rope and toss coins to you now?"

The little khedeev cracked a smile around his yellow teeth. "O but you are a girl. Would you make a pretty, virtuous thing for God to snatch away, leaving me as I am now?"

"Virtuous? O *sáyeed,*" Iánheh tá-Heybesi replied, cupping the copper bracelet at her wrist, "there is no danger of that."

THE VACCINATOR'S DAUGHTER LED THE LITTLE khedeev to a ferryboat that took them southward down the Crocodile Canal to Renáriyá. Thence westward by rail to Qáriyá, because he had the coinage to let them spaces in a mostly empty cattle car. Qáriyá is said by certain writers to be the greatest city on earth, and in terms of antique wonders this can hardly be doubted, although the city was deficient (though not altogether lacking) in manufactories, mills, telegraph wires, and other modern fixtures so common in the west.

Many of the foreigners who had fled Noofr had come to Qáriyá. Such an influx greatly pleased those in the business of letting rooms, but, because this was also a festival season during which pilgrims journey to honor their ancestors (westward of Qáriyá lie suburbs of the dead), it meant that the little khedeev and Iánheh had to camp in an alley near one the eastern entrances. Little traffic passed them

by after the horologues sang the city's seventy-two gates shut at the first hour of night. When Iánheh suggested that he take advantage of their relative solitude to send the rope into the night sky, so that she might discreetly climb it once or twice and become accustomed to its peculiarities, the little khedeev laughed until he coughed. "Girl! Who would see you then? Whose heart could you satisfy in the darkness? Would you have the moon or the stars carry you away? Such middling ambitions!"

In the morning they went into a certain broad crossroads of several *sooqs,* principally devoted to produce-sellers and to makers of shoes, boots, and slippers. He had Iánheh identify a well-stocked fruit-seller at a corner and near this woman's narrow cell he settled. As he opened the basket, a carrion odor wafted out. "A mouse crawled in and died last night," Iánheh said, settling some of its heavy coils on the ground. "Or maybe a night or two before." The little khedeev thrust his nose over the basket and took a deep breath. He shook his head and waved her off to perform *leger-de-man.*

Small coins disappeared from the hands of large men and reappeared as large coins from the ears of small children. One orange—honestly paid for—became two and then three, to the consternation of the fruit-seller who sat queenly upon her *mustubeh* (a brick bench), smoking a *nargeleh.* The woman cried from around the mouthpiece of her pipe, "If fruit can be so easily come by, I'll cut down half my grove and sell the wood to some rich man!"

"Yá sáyeeda," said Iánheh as she passed to her the oranges, "you should have more faith in the order of the world as ordained by your God!"

And the fruit-seller then saw that one of her bags had collapsed, half-empty. She called people to witness this juggler with her poor blind *sáyeed,* to marvel at the pretty *kopeet*'s tricks, to pity the old man's condition—and O might not someone be a little hungry too?

With fingers sticky from the fruit-seller's produce, onlookers applauded Iánheh's *leger-de-man,* thankful that this nimble-fingered monkey was kept in plain sight, else they would surely lose their purses. (This stung Iánheh's pride, because, copper bracelet aside, she was really not much inclined toward casual thievery.) A coin fell, then two. She forgave them then their stings and barbs.

Very soon a restlessness grew among them. The call of a child or husband, a foreman's cry to some member of his gang, a shopkeeper summoning his messenger, donkey-driver, or gatekeeper, tugged at them. Just as a few began to wander away, the little khedeev blew a wheezing gale through the embouchure.

The ivory horn blasted everything else in the crossroads into silence. And, beneath that tempestuous insufflation of noise, like a whisper in a storm came a hush-rustle from within the basket. The rope extended to sway against the morning breeze. Its far end, its frayed head knotted to the size of a strongman's fist, held at the height of the awning that shaded the fruit-seller's *mustubeh.* The little khedeev's breath reverberated through the horn, whose note was no longer so loud. The crowd regained its voice, the rope crawled higher. Joined to the air by an umbilical cord of halfa-grass, the unremarkable basket became the navel of the world.

The buildings around this certain crossroads were not so tall as those about that plaza in Noofr. None stood more than two stories. A few were capped with pigeon towers which sufficiently enterprising youths might have scaled, but the young men had come down to the street to view Iánheh earthbound more closely. The rope had gone a little higher now, to the level of the rooftop of the nearest building plus two yards. As this building happened to be a single story, it was therefore not very far to climb. Even so, she hesitated to touch the rope. Boys fell even from such heights. Most of these unfortunates broke a wrist, arm, ankle, spirit, thus ending their careers. Others were even less fortunate. She had, once or twice, delivered their bodies and their souls to the servants of the Temple.

"Up! Up! Up, you pretty monkey!" said the fruit-seller. A child threw pebbles at her feet, and some of the youths challenged her to climb higher than their heads, that they could get a good look at her from below.

Iánheh bowed to them and up the rope she swarbled, badly, arms and shoulders shaking with effort, heels kicking for some absent purchase on the halfa-grass fibers, the cotton-sheathed flesh of her thighs and knees pinching the rope like gloved forefinger and thumb. (She wore that immodest eastern type of female trouser, which is not considered an acceptable garment beyond the Antique Lands.) She did not succeed in her climb, but nor did she fail. The best that may be said is that she attempted.

She said to herself, "Well, this must annoy my *sáyeed,* but I never promised him that I was a good rope-climber. And anyway, the bystanders don't seem to mind."

The bystanders did not, as it happened, mind at all. Girls are rarer rope-climbing specimens and, therefore, something to stare after, no matter how ill they fare. She hung in midair, clutching the rope with an evident desperation, mere yards above their heads. Ululations from below, especially from the older youths. (Her performance happened to occur along a route commonly taken to the Polytechnic Institute, a foundation of the unpopular khedeev's brother.) Until she could hold no longer, in which time she slipped down the rope, hands burned. Her feet came to rest upon a carpet of coins. They slipped beneath her, so she fell undignified to the dust.

Such was her presentation for the first day, and the second. By the third, although the rope was somewhat higher than it had been previously, she had accustomed herself to its sways and ripples, which originated, it seemed to Iánheh, from the basket, or flowed, or pulled, at least, upward from some point below her. She began to experiment with the strength of the crook of each arm, and with wrapping the rope around a lower leg and pressing upon it with a foot, thus standing one-legged on the braid of halfa-grass and surveying the rooftops and pigeon towers. By the sixth day Iánheh could rely on a hand and a foot only, which was fortunate because now the bystanders were becoming bored with her swarbling up and, once she climbed as far as she dared, clutching the rope like a frightened infant at its mother's leg. To their credit, they had maintained their interest notably longer than the people of Noofr, who had been presented with a superior performance by the boy.

She did, it must be emphasized, but a single one of these performances each day, as the boy had done and as rope-charmers do in most places. While the magic is not especially difficult to achieve, it is excessively difficult to maintain. Using a rope of any weight or making it bear a burden only complicates matters. Some rope-charmers will work in bouts of several minutes. The little khedeev preferred a sustained exhibition and had perfected it to last nearly an entire hour.

At her *sáyeed*'s suggestion, after the sixth day Iánheh performed an unshodding. This met with the distinct approval of the nearby footwear-makers, who, for a certain sum given to the old man, arranged to have examples of their craft highly displayed. She began her ascent wearing a pair of sandals, boots, or slippers, whatever was given to her that day. The little khedeev had Iánheh devise a series of tricks that would keep the bystanders' gaze at her ankles for a period of time before she went too high. Juggling was good for this, and pulling coins and fruit from her footwear even better. Then she kicked off her slippers or what-had-she, to the delight of boys and certain more ambitious men, who jostled to catch them. Foreign men —tourists and businessmen—were not quite so bold as the Ópetians. They stared wondering at indecently naked female toes and ankles, a common enough sight in Ópet if very seldom from below. (Afterward, many of them bought slippers to send home as presents for their wives, but never for their daughters.)

The crossroads choked with bystanders then of all races and nations and professions. The police from the local guard-house kept watch and found no offense on which to arrest anyone. The *bashawruzool,* or chief of bailiffs, came himself to inspect the situation and could identify no reason to issue a warrant. Nor could clerks from the khedeeval palace, even after returning to the archives which house all manner of ancient and dehydrated law. Try as they might, the officials could not define the assembly as an unruly mob because its constituents did not act in any way in concert and were, in any

case, entirely passive. The assembly lasted no more than one summer daylight hour. There was nothing of a "secret" nature that the girl could have seen from her height. The magic itself was of an entirely legal variety and the little khedeev (whom they did not refer to as such in Qáriyá, for reasons too obvious to require elaboration) paid the appropriate fees and taxes on his collections. Many clerks spent some days puzzling over this, fascinated to the point where they took their pots, pestles, and other apparatus of a coffee service, and their *nargelehs,* into the archives and enjoyed their afternoon leisure there. (This self-indulgence resulted in the unfortunate loss of a small stack of very ancient texts, and damage to a slightly larger stack, none of which would have had any bearing on this particular case.) A few of the clerks even went back to the *sooq* to observe the display, thus giving tacit sanction to the performances.

After all this time, what the clerks, the *bashaw-ruzool,* and any other bystander expected, and came, to see was something like this: the girl did *leger-de-man* of the sort that tended to amuse small children until the old man blew his horn. The rope rose. When it was a certain height, the girl leapt to the rope. With visible effort she hauled and crawled up to a not very great height, though this improved day by day. Here, she played with her sandals (or boots or slippers) before sacrificing them to the onlookers below. A little higher, she juggled an orange the fruit-vendor had given to her. Heel to hand to knee again, to elbow, to palm. A leg and an elbow dedicated to the rope, the rest of her to the crowd. Then, a little higher.

The crowd ululated, loudly and joyously, and dropped coins from their fingers. Their tongues braided praise for Iánheh—"What a virtuous girl! What a pretty girl! O God! O God!"—which rose from their gaping mouths. If below she was a snake, above she was a swallow, lifted in an updraft.

Soon the rope became a little slack. Iánheh felt a familiar sensation, a ripple, a tremble. Both she and the crowd had come to anticipate the end of the hour and to equally dislike it. She missed the sweet breeze, the ululation of praise, the prayers of O God O God that almost, but only almost, filled a painful hollowness in their hearts.

On one of these days, as she descended, a tensity rippled up and then down the rope as it released the sky. Iánheh began to slide, the rope biting her hands, knees, ankles. The crowd shouted and cried. Horrified mothers turned their children away, while keeping watch themselves. The Polytechnic youths argued how best to catch her, coming to no timely decision. The horn slipped from the little khedeev's mouth. The rope withdrew into a hasty coil.

Iánheh dropped the last three yards. The impact drove her thighbones hard into her hips and rattled her jaw. She did not otherwise fall, this time.

"O! O!" the crowd exclaimed. They threw more coins than they had before and drifted away, as if, like the rope, they had shrugged themselves free of the little khedeev's spell.

THEN CAME ANOTHER PARTICULAR DAY THAT BEGAN like those before it. On his way from their camp in the alley to the *sooq,* the little khedeev gleaned good-mornings from clerks and Polytechnic students, and broke fast with the fruit-vendor. But this morning, as Iánheh and the old man crouched, eating raisins, no one stopped to inquire if they were to perform today. The fruit-vendor hailed passers-by. People paused, bought her dates and raisins and oranges, glanced at the little khedeev, and went on their way.

"What are they doing?" the old man asked, and Iánheh told him. "Do not squat in the dust," he said, slapping her but lightly. "Give a tidbit for their hearts, that they will linger, or there will be no more sky for you!"

Iánheh juggled the fruit-vendor's produce and returned it unbruised. Passers-by awarded her only flat gazes, if they looked at her at all. Even the youths, deciding her to be untouchable, found other amusements (perhaps other girls who would toss their slippers from windows rather than from ropes), and the foreigners had seen enough of her naked heels (and many went off to touch the real thing in a bathhouse).

"O this I have seen, many times," one clerk said to another, who was visiting from Upper Ópet. Iánheh recognized the former and bowed, favoring both with a smile and a proffered fig, no, two figs.

"But I have not," said the Upper Ópetian clerk, who began to reach for the fruit.

"It is nothing," the first clerk answered. He picked two oranges from a sack and paid the fruit-vendor for them. "You may see it any day, for they are always here, the blind man and his monkey-girl, and she goes up, up, up. It has been this way for, oh, thirteen days? Or thirty nine? Long enough, long enough!" Both passed by.

The horn-blast signaled the end of Iánheh's earthbound antics and signaled away her worried frown. The rope rose. A coin struck the little khedeev's toe. The *bashaw-ruzool* was still amused.

Up, high as she could, to please him. There was a small gathering now, modest. It stirred, snagging others who might have otherwise passed by. Someone was clapping. She could hear a heavy pounding, rhythmic, encouraging her pace. In trying to keep up with it, her legs slipped from the rope. Below, rumbling impatience transformed into thin ululations (encouragement) and gasps (surprise). It pleased them to see a rope-climbing girl with feet dangling free, fingers-and-palms

SHE HAD BECOME SOMETHING TOO HIGH TO BE REACHED, TOO DISTANT TO BE REAL ANY LONGER TO ANYTHING OTHER THAN THEIR HEARTS.

from plummet. Sensible to this, she indulged them by hauling herself up, hand-over-hand. It had become easier now. The rope, or the air around it, or the little khedeev's notes, or most likely the ardency of the onlookers, buoyed her along on a more palpable current.

The rope had risen far higher than anyone might have thought possible. She now hung fifteen or sixteen yards above the ground, and yards more of the rope stood above her. "Can they see the sweat soaking my trousers, the raw-red skin of my palms?" Iánheh said to herself. "Can they see my eyes?"

They could not, the crowd rooted to the dirt, not with their own eyes. She had become something too high to be reached, too distant to be real any longer to anything other than their hearts.

"I must be something to them yet, anyway," Iánheh said. "They still stare. Others pause, stop, and they gape like the rest, like baskets, braiding pretty strands of words that they send up to me. I can hear their O God O God. Higher, then, just a little higher, just for you. Maybe this will sate you."

The higher she climbed, the sweeter the breeze, the stronger the current. Then came a point at which it seemed that she might have passed through an invisible membrane, which hitherto she had but hung below. Here, the ting of each coin hitting the dirt echoed, as did the old man's phlegmatic breath passing through the horn, and, above all, the rhythmic hearts of the crowd.

Below, the crowd said, "Is she gone? O God! O God! Will you take her? O God! O God! Be kind, O God! O God! Be generous to our hearts, O God! O God!"

Iánheh drew the ambrosial air—stuff surely held back from the dusty earth by this membrane—into her lungs and held it there. The rope too was making a noise. It was like the noise one hears in one's own ears, amid even completest silence. It was like a rushing,

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ROCK MUSICIANS LIKE TO SAY,
"IT'S ALL ABOUT THE MUSIC, MAN."
BUT IS IT EVER, REALLY? SHOULD IT BE?

Stephanie Shrugs

BY JOSH ROUNTREE & ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC FORTUNE

STANTON, TEXAS—OCTOBER 1989

It's easy to get girls when you play guitar.

At least in a nothing town like mine. The kind of place people from the city drive through and wonder how anybody could live there. Nothing for a sixteen-year-old to do but get drunk and find trouble. Not that I'm complaining. Fill a Big Gulp cup half full of Coke, then top it off with a pint of Jack, and life gets better in a hurry.

My friend Bobby's garage is insulated well enough that our band can usually jam for a couple of hours before the cops show up, and that's what we're doing when this woman walks in.

I'm not talking about one of the high school girls that lounge around on the stained orange sofa we keep in the corner, sucking on bottles of Strawberry Hill. Most of them think I'm a rock star.

But this is a woman. Early twenties probably, and gorgeous. She's got killer hair, an explosion of blonde curls falling down her back. A Whitesnake tee-shirt, tiny denim skirt studded with silver. No way she's from around here. The town's small enough that you get to know everyone, for better or worse. And besides, she's made for MTV. Last I checked, they aren't shooting any rock videos in the Dairy Queen parking lot.

I'm choking out the lyrics to "Youth Gone Wild"—not that I'm much of a singer, but I'm doing my best—when I feel the vibe change in the room. All eyes, mine included, lock on the woman as she takes a few steps into the garage and lights up a cigarette. You can tell straight off all the girls hate her. Catty foreheads pressed together, lips hidden behind their hands, nervous laughter. Probably talking about what a slut she is.

Our jam sessions attract guys too. A few friends, always ready for a party, and a bunch of guys who aren't part of our crowd but would like to be. They look all serious and nod their heads, like they're really into the music and too cool to bother with the girls. Meanwhile they're wondering if they have a shot at getting laid, and telling themselves they're finally gonna buy a guitar and learn to play. Can't be that hard, right? But none of them ever will.

That's the difference between us.

Now they're staring at the woman, trying not to look like their minds are totally blown, trying harder than ever to seem

We finish the song and there's some [illegible] from the guys, a few more cat calls from the [illegible] Hill section.

"I need a beer." I slip the guitar over my head, place it gently [illegible]

[illegible] like a woman who should be hanging on my [illegible] and shouting in Bobby's garage. [illegible] but she might as well be [illegible] girls won't have any [illegible] and the guys know she's way out of their [illegible] Mine too, but I guess she doesn't get that. While I'm [illegible] a beer out of the cooler, trying not to stare, she [illegible]

"Got something for you," she says.

I wave it off, pop the tab off the beer, and offer it to her. I hope my hand isn't shaking too much.

She shakes her head and reaches into her bag. "I [illegible] just came to give you something."

She pulls out some kind of [illegible] cigarette girls use, and it [illegible] like many. Then she [illegible]

"Here's the [illegible] My band [illegible] [illegible]

I do, and it's just a normal record. The cover is a black and white photo, a reverse negative of some long-haired dudes rocking out. Looks a hell of a lot like every other garage band on the planet. The album's called Bleach and the band's named Nirvana.

"Yeah? Who're these guys?"

"Nirvana."

"I can read. But what's this for? Why're you giving it to me?"

She leans in so close I can feel her earrings against my cheek. Her whisper is warm in my ear. "Because it's going to change your life."

She pulls back, kisses me right on the corner of my mouth. Before I can recover from my mini heart attack and figure out how to respond, she's ducking beneath the half-open garage door.

A second later, she's gone.

Realizing everyone's staring at me, I chug the entire can of beer and strap on my guitar like it was no big deal.

Later that night, I drop the needle on the record.

And my whole fucking life changes.

Seattle, Washington—October 1993

It's easy to get coffee when you live in Seattle.

French roast, espresso, latte, some frothed something or other topped with whipped cream. Might as well be a milkshake. Me, I'm drinking plain old American Joe—black—watching rain streak down the window.

The place is called Bean There, Done That and it's homey. One of those little hole-in-the-wall dives that makes you feel like a local just because you know it exists. I guess that's what I am now, a local. Been here a couple of years and people have mostly stopped commenting on my Texas accent. My coffee cup's empty and I'm trying to decide if I have time for another before rehearsal. I've been stalling, hoping the rain would stop. I should know better.

The brass bell over the door rings. I look up, and there she is. I haven't seen my mystery woman since the night she turned me on to Nirvana, set me on the path that ultimately led here. Different hair, different clothes, but nothing else has changed. She's still a knockout, like she hasn't aged a day. Obviously the woman's a few years older than me, but she doesn't look it. She doesn't have to scan the room; she already knows where I'm sitting. I'm not surprised when she takes a seat at my table.

Her jacket's denim, her tights are some sheer black fabric, her skirt's tie-dyed cotton. The blonde curly hair doesn't have nearly as much hairspray, but it's just as beautiful. So's her voice. "I knew you'd be here."

I laugh, wondering whether she means Bean There, Done That or the State of Washington. Wondering whether that even matters.

"Was I right? Did the record change your life?"

I nod. She already knows it did. "What's your name?"

"Stephanie."

Her name yanks me from the overcast world of today and drops me smack dab in the middle of memory. A weedy elementary school playground, sitting with Stephanie Warner on a bench built to look like a caterpillar. Green paint chips flake away as she scoots closer to me, then plants a kiss on my cheek. Her lips rest there for two wonderful seconds and a whole new world of possibilities is born in my mind. Then she takes her lips back and runs away. I realize how much Stephanie Warner reminds me of the Stephanie sitting across from me. She smiles, and I get the uneasy feeling she's sharing my memories.

"I like that name." A day hasn't passed in three years that I haven't thought about this woman, and that's the best I can muster. I'm so overloaded with questions, I don't even know where to start. Just like last time, Stephanie leads the way.

"You're wondering who I am."

"For starters."

"And whether or not I'm an escaped mental patient."

I laugh. "The thought had crossed my mind."

"You tired of Garageland yet?" Her question comes straight out of left field and I'm not sure exactly what she means.

"The song? Shit no. The Clash never gets old."

"Not the song, the lifestyle. Wake up, go to your suck day job, then jam in somebody's garage, or somebody's cousin's rented rehearsal space. Then on weekends you scramble for third bill at a bar you've never heard of, just so you can make no money and do it all over again. That's Garageland. You tired of it?"

"At least I'm doing something I love."

"So you wouldn't rather do something you love and get paid for it? Your band is good enough. All that's holding you back is contacts. You don't know the right people."

"I know the guys in Nirvana." I'd moved to Seattle right after graduation, and met Kurt Cobain just a few months before everybody on the planet figured out who he was. Good guy, pretty shy actually. Now he's been harnessed with a level of fame I can only imagine. I haven't seen him in over a year.

"Good for you. How many gigs has that gotten you lately?"

"Not many."

"You want to headline?"

"Of course."

"Then call this guy." She hands me a business card with a booking agent's name and phone number on it. Before I can tell her I've hounded every booking agency in the Northwest, she starts talking again. "Invite him to your next gig. He'll pay you lip service, then hang up on you. But he'll be at the gig. Play your ass off. If you do, it'll change your life."

She pushes her chair back and stands.

"Hang on," I say, not comfortable enough to grab her arm, but desperate to keep her from walking away again. "Where are you going? Do you live around here?"

She shrugs her shoulders and smiles. "Chill out. You'll see me again. Probably." She gives me another kiss, and this one lingers on my lips even after she pulls away. I can't do anything but watch as she walks out of the coffee house. I want to follow her, but I'm afraid of what might happen if I do.

The business card is like an unfulfilled promise in the palm of my hand.

She was right last time.

"That a public phone?" I ask the waitress cleaning off the table next to me.

"Sure, if it's a local call."

It's hanging by the door. I have to pass it before I brave the rain.

"Fuck it," I say, and dial the number.

Seattle, Washington—April 1994

It's easy to kill yourself with a shotgun. Just ask Kurt. Stick it in your mouth and pull the trigger. Nothing left but an ugly stain to clean up, a generation of people blindsided by reality, and one bona fide rock and roll legend.

Too fucking easy.

Rain pours from the sky like it always does, but nobody gathered at the makeshift memorial gives a shit. They're all too stunned. Plenty of tears and mumbled prayers. Ink smearing on condolence cards, wilting flowers, crushed cigarette packs, beer cans. Disillusioned, muddy mourners. Some guy with an acoustic guitar keeps playing "All Apologies" over and over again, like it's going to change anything. He'd better stop soon or I'm gonna knock the shit out of him.

My anger surprises me. Something like this, you figure I'd be sad. But instead, I'm pissed. What was the guy thinking? I knew about his drug problems and his screwed-up personal life. But I can't imagine it getting to the point where somebody decides to end it with a shotgun blast. Kurt was the biggest rock star in the world. The guy had a kid, for God's sake.

A few of the guys in my band were here earlier, but the rain chased them away. Me, I'm here for the long haul. I'm looking for some kind of understanding.

Stephanie appears next to me, and I realize I've been expecting her to come.

She looks no different than she did that day in Bean There, Done

That, except now she's wearing a bright yellow rain slicker. Her hair is pasted to her skull, just like the rest of us. She laces her fingers through mine and leans her head on my shoulder.

"Why'd he do it?" There are so many other things I'd like to ask her, but none of them seem important right now.

Stephanie shrugs. I don't expect anything more. I gave up trying to understand her a long time ago. Stephanie is Stephanie. She just is.

"You heard my song on the radio?"

"Of course," she says.

Stephanie's advice had been dead on. The booking agent was an asshole, but he loved us. Got us gigs at all the cool clubs and we wound up signing with Sub Pop. We've been getting some pretty good local airplay. Nothing major, but we're famous enough around town that quite a few of the mourners recognize me.

"What are you here for this time?"

She looks into my eyes and her usual amusement has been replaced with sadness. "You sure you want this?"

I'm used to her answering my questions with questions, but I don't know what she means by this. "The fame or the suicide?"

She doesn't answer, she just keeps staring.

"Look, I love Kurt but the guy obviously had problems. If you're asking whether I want to give up my dream of being a rock star, the answer is no. It's all I ever wanted. My head's on straight."

"I'm not saying you'll kill yourself. Just that not every dream is worth falling asleep for."

"I'll take my chances."

"Then think of me, next time you write a song."

"Let me guess. It'll change my life."

"Hopefully not too much." Stephanie kisses my nose, then disappears. I don't mean she gets lost in the crowd. She just fades away, and so does any pretense that she's a normal person. Not that I hadn't already figured that out.

A melody pops into my head. Something radio-friendly but not so much it makes me feel like a sell-out. I think about the sadness in Stephanie's eyes, and the coy way she shrugs her shoulders. I think about how beautiful and strange she is.

And the lyrics come in a torrent of inspiration.

New York, New York—March 1999

It's easy to lose perspective when you're the biggest rock star in the world.

It's also easy to lose hope.

I stare out the window of my New York penthouse, past the jagged landscape of skyscrapers, to the far horizon. Somewhere out there is Bobby's parents' garage, and I wonder if it's changed. Could be they've converted it into a workshop or filled it with all the junk they don't have room for in the house anymore. Maybe just parking their cars there like normal people. But I like to think it's still the same. Amps humming, a skinny kid smacking the snare drum, impatient for the song to start. Another one tuning a hand-me-down guitar. The place clogged with cigarette smoke and laughter.

That's what it's about, right?

Rock and roll. Not rock stars.

I'm alone, thank God. Finally ushered out all the people with their hands in my life, the ones pulling the strings and the ones just content to push me closer to the edge. People who only want to be near me because I'm famous. They don't care about me, and the feeling's mutual.

I don't even turn around when I see Stephanie's reflection in the glass. But I smile. I used to think my unhappiness was Stephanie's fault. But she's never done more than give me what I wanted most in the world.

"How's the dream?" She comes into focus and she's standing beside me. She still smells like berries, and she's still painfully beautiful.

"Not bad. It has its rough edges, but it beats living in obscurity." I only half believe my own words.

"Glad to hear it. 'Stephanie Shrugs,' huh?"

"Not a bad name for a song." Not a bad name for a cultural revolution either. "Stephanie Shrugs" launched us from nightclubs to stadiums. It was the kind of song you can't escape. Airport lobbies, restaurants, elevators. Every fucking station on the radio dial. The album hugged the top of the Billboard charts for two years. Even my grandma bought a copy.

"Just before your CD hit the charts, I gave a copy of it to this kid living in Garageland. Changed his life."

My smile fades. "You did, huh? Didn't know you got around that much."

The realization that I share this vision with someone else causes me to feel betrayed. Jealous even. Ridiculous, but I can't help it. I've seen this woman a handful of times in my life, but I'd convinced myself she existed for me. I'd even entertained thoughts that one day she'd stay. How can someone who's so fleeting be the most important person in your life?

Stephanie shrugs, and I've never been so hurt in my life.

"Why are you here? Do I need you anymore?"

The pain in her eyes immediately makes me regret my words. A face like that isn't supposed to hurt.

"I came to see if you were tired of this yet."

"How could I be?"

I can tell she wants to shrug, but she thinks better of it. "It can be a little much."

"I'm fine. You can stop worrying. Anything else?"

Stephanie shakes her head. She's stopped looking me in the eye.

"Then have fun with your new pet project."

Stephanie steps through the glass and vanishes into the New York night. She doesn't bother to kiss me this time.

Dallas, Texas—April 2004

It's easy to contemplate suicide when you're this fucking lonely.

Bottle of sleeping pills, straight razor to the wrist—lengthwise, not across—a noose dangling from that gigantic oak in the backyard, Drano cocktail, stepping in front of a bus. Doesn't matter. It all ends the same way.

Christ, how did I get here?

My North Dallas home is cluttered with junk. Unwashed dishes; stacks of CDs removed from the rack and left on the coffee table, couch, kitchen table, bookshelves, floor; way more guitars than any human needs, a drum set, a whole wall of amps; half-empty beer bottles by the score; a half-smoked bag of weed; me. Barefoot, torn jeans, shirtless.

In the middle of it all, I see the latest issue of *Spin*. A commemoration—ten years since Kurt's death. All that time, but he's still staring at me, and those eyes don't offer any answers. But the journalists think they have him figured out. He wasn't built for fame. The drugs, the upheaval, the way every person you meet wants to be right fucking next to you. Wants to touch you, wants you to say something cool they can tell their buddies about, wants you to see them, with those eyes. So all the pressure drove him to heroin, misery, depression. Death.

I'm not mad at Kurt anymore. I think I understand why he did what he did.

The thing is, Kurt never got to find out what life's like on the other side of the rollercoaster. When the sales begin to slump and the record label drops you. When all your friends find new friends, and all the skinny, tan twenty-somethings in their hip-hugger jeans and belly shirts find a new God to worship. When nobody gives a fuck about any of your new music because it's not "Stephanie Shrugs." When you realize they're right and your muse has abandoned you.

When you're so in love with a mystery you can't even function.

The place smells like an ashtray and so do I. I've cleared just enough space on the carpet for me and the shotgun. It's an old Remington my granddad used to hunt quail with and I figure if it's good enough for Kurt, it's good enough for me.

I take a drag off my cigarette and think about the way Stephanie looked the first time I saw her. The way she'd look now if I hadn't

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Black Jack Barry

Life is hard on the frontier, and daydreamin' about true love and happiness won't get you anywhere, with it.

BY TRENT HERGENRADER ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN HORTON

A VOICE INSIDE BECCA'S HEAD TOLD HER NOT TO look but she did anyway. The mare had snorted violently followed by Bill's garbled exclamation. Any fool could guess what might happen next. Becca turned in time to see Nessie's haunches buck as her husband's hand slipped from the saddle horn. Nessie bucked again and off flew Bill, his arms pinwheeling in a failed attempt to grasp some piece of the animal as he fell.

Words flooded to her lips and she wanted to [illegible] "No, my [illegible] son of a bitch, no!" [illegible] could speak a word, Bill's head hit the grou[illegible] crack, like a dry branch breaking off a dec[illegible] landed with a thud and a cloud of [illegible]

Becca didn't remember running t[illegible] kneeling in the dirt, [illegible] the words, "You can't [illegible] ancient cowhand [illegible] smothered [illegible] Becca, it's alright," in the [illegible] could muster. Nessie [illegible] Becca. [illegible]

Becca lay beneath [illegible] watched [illegible] glaborish [illegible] right [illegible] he [illegible] hundred times if he'd been told once, didn't mind [illegible] when Nessie was in a foul temper, but [illegible] and old Nessie finally got her due.

Sam helped her to the wash bin. After she had rinsed her face, she let Sam guide her inside the ranch house. In her cramped bedroom, she lay on the lumpy mattress, sniffling, her head pounding. She traced the depression where Bill would never sleep again. She listened to the indifferent chirping of larks and, faintly, the steady scritch of Sam's shovel.

She closed her eyes, wondered when the Boss would come home.

AS A HUSBAND, BILL HAD BEEN A CONSTANT disappointment. He wasn't a drinker or a gambler and for that Becca supposed she should have been thankful, but he wasn't a smart man by any stretch. Just two months after their wedding, Bill had already squandered his father's endowment, losing it on a handful of half-baked real estate schemes. With their pockets empty, Bill spent their last few dollars on two train tickets west in hopes of striking it rich mining Montana gold. When they arrived in Helena, they learned that the big strikes had been mined out for nearly a year and most sensible folks had already moved on. With no money and no future prospects save starvation, it was just dumb luck that Bill should stumble across the Boss in a saloon. He needed workers and they needed work. Just that simple.

They arrived at Blackjack Valley with the onset of autumn and plenty of work waiting for them. It was a pretty enough setting: tree-strewn hills on either side of the ranch house and barn, and a meandering trail down to the river. Bill wrote his parents swearing he'd prove his strength of character as a cowboy, and hoped yet to win back their love and admiration. Now, almost exactly two years since that golden fall day they arrived at the ranch, Bill lay dead and Becca had nothing.

She watched the shadows stretch on the bedroom wall and wondered, briefly, whether she might have disappointed Bill, too. She never could give him that baby he wanted, but if he held it against her, he never did say. She suspected he had finally come to the same conclusion she had long ago—life was cold and hard and the only way to survive was to be colder and harder than what got dished to you; but Bill always had been a softy.

In the dead of night, he'd told her that he accepted responsibility for all his bad decisions but he'd never count marrying her as one of them. He always told her he loved her. She usually repeated the words, but Becca knew love wasn't practical out here on the prairie. It was hard work loving someone. She had enough hard work.

Bird-like, thin, and fragile, she looked like something the wind could blow away. She had the complexion of a porcelain doll. The crisp spring air even painted her cheeks with natural dollops of red.

Becca supposed she had loved Bill though, the way you loved a pair of comfortable shoes or a flannel nightshirt—things you don't appreciate until they've gone missing. She shivered at the thought of the coming winter without something warm to sleep against.

Sam's shovel stopped and she heard his voice. Hired cowboys weren't allowed near the ranch and folks knew better than to wander in these parts. He had to be talking to the Boss.

Becca bolted up so quickly she felt light-headed.

AT SUNSET, THEY BURIED BILL IN A SHALLOW GRAVE AT THE foot of an old oak tree, just where the path fell off to the Blackjack River. Sam read from a tattered Bible, and Becca grimaced each time he mispronounced a word. She glanced at the Boss, but his head was turned down so she could only see his chiseled jaw beneath the brim of his hat.

When Sam's reading mercifully ended they mumbled an amen and stared in silence at the body in the hole, the outline of the burlap sack hardly visible as the shadows crept forward to claim it. The Boss finally looked up and said, "Ma'am, I am truly sorry for your loss."

Becca stared into his steely gray eyes and bobbed her head, not trusting her voice. The Boss rarely spoke to her, preferring to assign her chores through Sam and Bill. She felt warmed by the glimmer of compassion she saw in his weathered face and, for a moment, she felt the evening gloom held at bay. When he turned away to grab a shovel, Becca felt the chill of the night rush in like she'd just sat back from a fire.

Sam patted her arm with a gnarled hand. "Go back now, Miss Becca. We'll finish up here." The Boss pushed dirt into the hole.

Without once looking back, Becca stumbled along the faint ribbon of trail that meandered back to the ranch, hoping to reach it before the valley was overtaken by darkness.

THINGS CHANGE SLOWLY ON THE PRAIRIE. A winding mountain stream twists and turns and cuts itself ever deeper into the landscape with every passing moment. Such change is imperceptible to the naked eye, and rarely noticed by the frontiersman contending with more immediate demands of the prairie.

Seasons pass, the moon shows her many faces, and the cattle set free to wander for the summer are rounded up in the fall. The rancher occupies himself by breaking in horses, perfecting skills with rope and gun, and saving his heifers from sucking mud, pitfalls, and would-be rustlers lurking at the fringes of the herd. The weeks between winters pass like blades of grass through his fingers; yet no matter how quickly time flies, the rancher's days are full, as long and wide as the yawning prairie sky. The rigors of his endless toil are offset by communing with his hired cowboys, kindred spirits of the untamed West. No matter how exhausting the day, there's always time for a campfire, a hot meal, drink, and a bawdy song by the campfire under a canopy of blazing stars. Life is hard but good. The rancher wouldn't have it any other way.

The time between winters is quite different for those tending the ranch. For them, time is measured in cycles of mundane tasks: batches of laundry; trips to the river for water; and, in the fly-bitten stillness of August, time passes with each monotonous stroke of the butter churn. For them, the expansive frontier is nothing but a narrow wedge between the steep valley walls. Life for those tending the ranch demands a different type of toughness, a fortitude and resolve against the ever-encroaching lonesome.

Months march on, the days shorten, leaves turn rust-colored and fall from the trees. The autumn round-up draws the herd close to the ranch. The hired cowboys retire to town for the winter to drink their wages, and the ranch workers stock provisions to last until spring. They brace the ranch for the howling ice storms that will sweep the valley.

In December, when the snow finally comes in earnest, folks retreat indoors. One must find diversions to occupy the brief, pale hours of daylight. Time seems to stop. Hands go idle. Minds wander.

Yet even then, in the frozen stillness of winter, things continue to change out on the prairie.

BECCA WATCHED THROUGH A CIRCULAR PATCH IN THE frost-wreathed window as Cutter, the Boss's coal-black stud, churned through shoulder-high snowdrifts. The Boss was heading out for the third time this month, braving the cold and the snow on the long trek to Helena. Becca perched at the window, her nose nearly touching the glass, watching until the horse and rider became just another black speck against the canvas of white snow. Then she started into Sam. He sat in the Boss's rocking chair near the fire whittling a knot of wood, listening to Becca ask about what could be so important in Helena that he'd risk life and limb traveling in such weather.

"Workers?" Becca asked. "Think that's it?"

Sam shook his head. "The Boss is satisfied with the cowboys he's got. He won't hire no winter drifter."

Becca scowled. "Well what, then? He ain't coming back with nothing."

"He ain't coming home empty handed. He tucks things under his arm secret-like. I seen things on the table in his room, perfumes and such. And I saw a little box. With a ring in it."

"Sam, no," Becca gasped.

"It's true or God brand me a liar."

"There ain't no women in Helena but wives and whores."

"A widow, maybe," Sam said and tossed a handful of shavings in the fire. Becca opened her mouth but Sam cut her off by whistling a low, slow tune, his infuriating way of ending a conversation.

Becca sat back and let the idea tumble through her head. A widow? She'd never smelled a hint of perfume or saw a smudge of lip rouge on the Boss's collar after he'd been to town. And wasn't it odd that such a handsome man wouldn't have any interest in the ladies? But maybe Sam was right. Maybe the Boss was lonely in that soft feather bed on these cold winter nights.

The Boss seemed especially restless this winter, as if the ranch had become too small to contain his spirit. He hadn't acted that way last winter, Becca reckoned, but there hadn't been an unmarried woman on the ranch then either. A sudden wave of pity washed over her. It must be hell for him to be cooped up in the ranch with her. Bill hadn't been in the ground six months and it was almost criminal to think about such things, but sometimes matters of the heart trumped those of the head. Winter wouldn't last forever, though. New things bloom in spring.

Becca took extra care ironing her aprons from then on and tried to stop cursing so often—it just wasn't ladylike. The winter blew itself out early that year and the towering banks of snow quickly melted away. Becca giggled when, a few weeks later, she saw the first tousle of yellowed grass peeking out through the snow. The air tasted sweeter. She thought she could even hear the buds on the trees growing, and the Blackjack River would soon break winter's icy hold and flow once again. Profound change was coming to Blackjack Valley and it was more than just the seasons.

Becca could just feel it.

THEN THE BOSS CAME HOME WITH HER—ANNA.

After the snow melted out completely and the path had become a muddy scar on the hillside, the Boss saddled up and told Sam that he'd be gone for a few days longer than usual. "Getting an early jump on the spring roundup?" Sam asked, but the Boss just shook his head. Curious business, Becca thought with a secret smile.

It was a week later when Sam called Becca to look lively, the Boss had come home. It couldn't have happened at a worse time; she was feeding the pigs and covered in mud and filth, not at all presentable. She tromped out of the pig pen and was hurrying for the wash bin when she glanced up the valley and saw him.

Them.

The Boss sat erect in the saddle and, mostly obscured by his thick body, was a childlike figure. Becca heard Sam come up behind her.

"Think that's a ... a niece or something?" she said, her voice hoarse. The stud's footfalls seemed to echo across the valley.

"I don't think so," Sam said with a grin.

"She don't look like much of a worker," Becca murmured. The whole world went still except for the sound of her breathing and the clopping of those hooves. Her mouth tasted like iron.

"She'll have a job alright," Sam said.

The Boss wheeled the horse to a stop, then helped the girl down from the saddle. Bird-like, thin, and fragile, she looked like something the wind could blow away. Becca reckoned she couldn't be more than fifteen years old. She had the complexion of a porcelain doll. The crisp spring air even painted her cheeks with natural dollops of red.

"This is Anna," Becca heard the Boss say. The girl performed a stilted half-curtsey, careful to keep her hem out of the mud, but didn't look up. "She's my new bride."

Becca forced her head to nod and she mumbled a hello. Her stomach turned and she feared she might be sick, right there in the yard on her mud-and-shit-covered boots.

"Welcome to Blackjack Valley, little lady," Sam said.

"Her things will be along once the trail's open to wagons. We'll be taking a rest now to recover from the trip. I don't want to be disturbed," the Boss said, taking Anna by her upper arm and leading her toward the house.

"Sure thing, Boss," Sam said with a wide grin as he watched them go. He whispered to Becca, "Finally came to his senses and decided to breed some help. Not wasting any time, neither."

Becca only half-listened. She was still staring at the closed ranch house door behind which the Boss and his new bride had disappeared.

"SHE'S NOT TO LIFT A FINGER."

Two weeks had passed but the Boss's words still echoed in Becca's ears. Her question about the girl's chores seemed innocent enough but they were met with a growl. That fool Sam nearly choked on his coffee stifling a guffaw. Becca's ears burned with embarrassment and, for a moment, she thought she heard a silvery, mocking laugh coming from behind the bedroom door, but neither of the men seemed to notice. The scorn in the Boss's voice was unmistakable, though, and she'd been running it continuously through her mind ever since. She thought about it as she picked at her bootlaces by the light of the new moon, her fingers red and swollen from plucking chickens.

Becca's fingers paused and she thought she heard a noise—a grunt of some sort, or maybe a cry. She crossed the room, one boot in hand, and put her ear to the wall. Sounds carried on still nights like this and the others had retired hours ago.

He'd likely be running his rough, working man's hands over Anna's smooth flesh right now, Becca imagined, exploring the mysteries of a young woman's body. He'd love her time and time again in a single night, the bristles of his moustache brushing over her shoulders, breasts, and beyond. Becca thought about Anna's fingers running through his salt-and-pepper hair, scratching thin white lines down his bucking back, knowing what it meant to be a woman in the hands of a frontier man.

"It's sinful what they're doing in there," she muttered as she sat back down. "He's old enough to be her father. She must be what, fifteen?"

Becca's fingers scratched again at the knotted laces. The girl did nothing but wander the ranch all day waiting for the Boss to get home, and every night it was the same thing. The Boss chowed down whatever Becca had fixed for supper without a word of thanks while the girl pushed her food around her plate, half-eaten, hardly saying a word.

"He hardly talks neither, except to bark about what chores didn't get done," Becca said to herself as she eased the boot off her raw heel. She didn't want to think about what always happened after dinner, but she thought about it anyway.

The Boss would take her, Anna, into the bedroom. The girl always acted like he was dragging her to the gallows, but when the bedroom door shut, Becca knew the girl dropped the act. Night after night it was the same routine. "It's a wonder the man still has strength to work," Becca said, and watched her fingers clench and unclench around the top of her boot.

Without thinking, Becca flung the boot across the room. It hit the wall with a dull thud and fell onto the bed. She drew a breath and covered her mouth, waiting for the inevitable shouts, the lights, the footsteps, her bedroom door being thrust open to see what had happened.

Minutes passed, and Becca's shoulders fell as she exhaled. No one had heard, no one was coming, and it was just her in the dark of her room, alone.

"WHY'S THIS CALLED BLACKJACK VALLEY?" ANNA ASKED TO no one in particular. She warmed her feet near the bonfire, a hand draped over the bump on her belly as she stared up at the stars. The girl had done her part and gotten pregnant and, as her reward, she

wanted to have at least one group bonfire before the season ended. She'd begged and begged and finally the Boss relented, just as the nights were getting longer and colder, the threshold of a new season. He built the fire and ordered Sam and Becca to sit down, shut up, and enjoy it.

Sam waited until he was sure no one else was going to answer Anna's question. "On account of Black Jack Davy, of course."

"Who's Black Jack Davy?"

Becca groaned inwardly.

"You haven't heard? Oh, it's a sad story, miss," Sam said, his wrinkled face creasing into a grin. "About true love gone wrong."

"Really?" Anna"s voice sounded distant.

"Here we go," Becca sighed. Sam's favorite. He'd told it a half-dozen times when she and Bill had first arrived, like he was afraid they might forget it.

"Oh yes," Sam said, sitting up and rubbing his hands as he warmed to the tale. "You see, there was a young cowboy who lived in these parts by the name of Jack Davy. Always wore a white shirt and white breeches whenever he went into town. Never spent his money on whiskey, or cards, or whores, if you'll pardon my language ma'am."

"Of course," Anna said with a giggle.

"The other cowboys poked fun, but Jack Davy told them he always dressed fine when he went to town because he never knew when he might meet his wife and he wanted to make a good first impression. Back then, women were even scarcer in these parts, if you can believe it.

"Then it actually happened. He saw a girl across the thoroughfare and his heart did somersaults. Her skin was the like fallen snow and her hair was spun gold. Poor Jack Davy didn't have a chance—he fell in love on the spot. In a daze, he stumbled over to her and damn near got hit by a coach, but the love-struck fool didn't even notice. After a moment of staring, he finally mastered his tongue and introduced himself, and she to him. Her name was Jessie Stein, and when she smiled her mouth drew up just like a bow.

"Well, her father saw this going on and broke it up as quickly as he could. He was a important rancher in these parts and he didn't want his only daughter marrying some filthy cowboy. He whisked her back to his ranch and told her to forget him. But Jack was smart, and it didn't take too much asking before he found Stein's ranch and paid the young girl a visit by light of an autumn moon, like this one.

"Jack whistled a sweet little tune and Jess knew it was him, so she crawled out her window to meet him. From that night on, Jack rode miles each night just to see her. But young love is as reckless as it is passionate and it didn't take Stein long before he got suspicious. He set the dogs out and told Jess that he'd shoot down any trespassers on his property. Fearing for his life, Jess told Jack to stay away. She cried a river of tears believing she'd never seen him again.

"Jack wouldn't give up so easy. Stein hadn't counted on his dogs being sweet on old Jack Davy and it wasn't long before he was back whistling outside Jess's window, surrounded by a posse of fawning hounds. Jack knew he and Jess couldn't carry on like this forever ,though, so he asked her to marry him right then and there. He promised they would run clear to Texas if that's what it took to be together. Jess didn't need any convincing, so they agreed to elope. That next night, Jack put on his fine white duds and rode to Stein's ranch to claim his bride.

"Who knows what went wrong? Maybe in their excitement they made too much noise, or maybe it was fate, or just bad luck, but old man Stein woke up the moment Jess's head left her pillow. He ran outside with his rifle and saw a white figure galloping for the hills and he fired three shots.

"The couple, they rode for hours seeking refuge before Jack finally stopped, sure they'd lost the pursuit. Then he found out he'd lost much, much more. Jess's face was ash-white. She'd been shot in the back and she'd dropped her lifeblood as they fled across the prairie."

"No," Anna breathed.

"Yes ma'am. Jack took her down to the riverbank and tried to restore her but it was too late—she'd passed. It's said that Jack stayed there for days weeping for his lost true love."

"What a tragic story," Anna said.

"If you believe it," Becca snorted.

"That's not all," Sam said. "It's said Jack buried her somewhere alongside the riverbank and, through the toil and sweat and tears, it turned his fine white clothes coal black, hat and all. He refused to eat or drink and he wasted away. He became a spirit, roaming the countryside, stealing young girls to replace his dearly departed. So if it's late at night and you think you hear a nightingale singing, it might just be Jack Davy whistling and wanting you to crawl out your window. That explains why the men in these parts keep their womenfolk under lock and key," Sam cackled and cast an unreturned grin at the Boss.

"I can't imagine his sadness," Anna said softly. "To be in love and have it stolen away. Such a cruel fate."

"Fate, hell. People get their just desserts out here on the prairie," Sam said.

Anna made a choking noise and glanced at Becca. "I'm so sorry, Miss Becca," she said. "We shouldn't be talking this way considering ... your loss."

Sam cleared his throat and shot Becca a glance. "I only meant them fool kids shouldn't have been running around behind the father's back, that's all—"

"Shut up Sam," the Boss growled.

"It's got nothing to do with what happened to Bill or nothing—"

"Sam." The Boss's voice dropped like a piece of steel.

After a moment of awkward silence, Becca grunted, "S'alright. It takes more than a fool story to ruffle my feathers. True love my foot. Love don't happen that way at all."

An uncomfortable silence fell upon them, save for the occasional snap of the fire or the wail of the thrashers in the trees.

BECCA DELIVERED ANNA'S BABY ON A STARK JANUARY afternoon amid much screaming, crying, and cussing from all parties involved. Becca dispensed the Boss's laudanum liberally to dull Anna's senses; it helped with the noise somewhat, but the girl still gripped Becca's hand with a strength belying her size. Sam was of no use, staying long enough only to replenish the warm water and removing the old before scurrying out again. Predictably, the Boss was out and missed all the fuss.

He came home two days later and didn't even smile when Sam announced that the women now outnumbered the men on the ranch. The Boss held his newborn daughter with stiff arms for a few moments before passing her back to Anna. He went to his saddle bag and produced the purpose of his trip, a belated Christmas gift new mother—a handsome pair of white leather boots and matching gloves.

"Handcrafted in Spain," the Boss said. "I paid a handsome price." He told her she should love them and wear them always. Anna nodded at him and took them without a word.

Only a few days later, Becca spied Anna quietly weeping in her bedroom. Her boots were discarded on the floor while the child screamed on the bed behind her. Anna wept, holding her head in one hand; with the other, she massaged her blistered feet.

AS A DAILY CHORE, MAKING LOVE SURELY BEAT DOING laundry, Becca thought as she scrubbed at the food stains on Anna's dress.

Yet another spring had come and the Boss, like a stud in season, wasted no time going to work on Anna. He had her in the bedroom morning, noon, and night, day after day. The Boss started going away for a few days at a time, and Becca knew those days would soon turn to weeks, and then he'd be gone for most of the summer.

Worse yet, Anna acted like her life was torture. The girl moped around the ranch hardly saying a word. She'd go for short walks, pawning the baby off on Sam whenever she could. The old sucker fell for it every time.

Becca wrung the cloth between her hands again until her nails bit her palms. She flapped the dress—Anna's favorite, no less—then hung

it on the line and stepped back to the barrel. A gentle breeze filled the dress with a phantom body. The dress arched and rippled, first from the shoulders and chest then down the front, ending at the dripping hem. The arms rolled forward one at a time, like a come-hither invitation to an unseen suitor. Becca had a sudden urge to tear the dress from the line and stamp on it with her boots until it was unrecognizable, but she restrained herself—there'd be no explaining it.

"Even her clothes make a fool of me," Becca thought as she gazed into the near-empty wash barrel. She snatched a pair of buckets and started down toward the river.

The world seemed especially vibrant as she made her way down the steep path to the Blackjack River. Sparrows twittered and chased one another in dizzying circles; bumblebees as big as her thumb buzzed from bloom to bloom; crickets chirped and sprang from the carpet of grass. To Becca, it was all commotion and annoyance. A new spring maybe, but it was the same old same old.

Halfway down the path she saw Anna. The girl had kicked her boots into the thick grass on the slope and stood knee-deep in the icy river, her dress held above the water with gloved hands, her head titled toward the sun. When Becca drew closer, Anna turned, offered a tentative smile, and watched her fill the buckets.

"Miss Becca?" Anna shouted over the rushing water.

"Yeah?" Becca grunted as she heaved the full bucket out of the water. Sweat poured down her face and she felt dizzy. It was a long way back to the house and the shade.

"Do you think she's buried around here somewhere?"

"Who?"

"Jess Stein. Jack Davy's beloved."

The river drowned out Becca's muttering. She shook her head.

"Maybe farther down. What's it like downriver from here?"

Becca shrugged and grabbed the empty bucket. She rested an arm across her knees, trying to catch her breath.

Anna sighed. "I wish I knew how to ride a horse. I'd ride alongside the river until I found the nicest, quietest spot. I bet that's where he buried her."

"It's not a woman's place to wish and want," Becca snapped. "It's a woman's job to do what you're told." Anna's face fell like she'd been slapped. "You can't wander far with that baby anyhow. Sam can't watch it all the time."

"I ... I didn't want the baby, if the truth be told," she said, her voice barely audible above the water. "I mean, I love her but I want to wander ... to travel, maybe go back East for a spell. But now I'm stuck here."

"Hell," Becca said. "Poor you. You think you're the only one?"

"No," said Anna. "It's just that I didn't expect my life to be like this. So much emptiness and so little ... oh, I don't know ... love, I guess."

"Little girl dreams, little girl fairy tales," Becca said, shaking her head. "Is that what you do all day, waste time daydreaming about Sam's silly stories?"

Anna"s bottom lip trembled. "I didn"t think love was a fairy tale."

"Don't start crying," Becca said as a tear spilled down Anna's cheek. "You've got nothing to cry about. You've got a good husband, a good home, and no chores except that baby. Sounds like a cozy life to me," she said, stooping to pick up the buckets. "You don't know how lucky you are. Spend your time doing what you're told and less time daydreaming about love. You'll be happier in no time."

"I don't feel so lucky," she said, the tears flowing now. "I don't feel lucky at all." She turned away and wept into her gloved hands, letting her dress fall into the river.

Becca didn't know what else to say but she knew two things: it was hot out, and the buckets were heavy. She started back up the trail. Becca gritted her teeth as the wire handles dug into her fingers. She tried to keep water from sloshing out onto the trail; if she spilled too much she'd need to go back a third time. Her arms quivered with the strain and she hadn't even gone five steps yet. Her breath came raggedly and her ears were buzzing. Then all the commotion suddenly stopped.

Becca heard whistling.

She thought that first lovely note might be a meadowlark but she realized it was more beautiful than any bird song she'd ever heard. She tilted her head to the tune floating on the breeze. For a moment she forgot her aching back and the heavy buckets in her hands. She held her breath and simply listened to that sweet, high note dripping in her ear like honey on her tongue.

She closed her eyes and felt the buckets drop from her hands. She heard them splash but that didn't matter—she was listening to the music. Her head rolled on her shoulders. Her knees trembled. The song grew louder, penetrating her skull and flowing over her body. Her back arched and her breasts throbbed. She opened her mouth in a silent moan as the feeling spread downward. Like a spark starting a wildfire, the tune ignited her; she burned with intensity between her legs.

She breathed short, explosive breaths as her free hand wandered to her neck and then down, guided almost by an invisible hand. The song urged her fingers farther; she caressed her stomach in wide, lazy circles before grasping a fistful of material between her knees and lifting it upward. She heard herself groan and she staggered, nearly falling. Becca's eyes flew open and she gasped, the spell broken. The feeling vanished as quickly as it had come. Yet the song remained.

Anna had waded into the river up to her waist, her golden hair streaming behind her. Her head was tilted to one side, her arms raised as if to embrace the song. Becca looked across the river and saw the source of the music.

A rider's silhouette stood against the morning sun, the whistling emanating from beneath his wide-brimmed hat. Becca's limbs felt numb as she watched him start down the trail and realized this wasn't some random drifter. This rider had come for a purpose—he'd come for Anna.

Becca stood paralyzed. She wanted to cry out to disrupt the song, or scream for Sam to get the shotgun and drive the trespasser off; but no words would come. She was unable to speak, scarcely able to breath. The man's gaze was fixed on Anna. His black horse's tail swished in time with the song. He was clad in black from his boots to his hat, with only his fair-skinned hands and face exposed. He was clean shaven and handsome, his pink lips forming a perfect "O" as he whistled. He looked both young and ageless. But more clearly than anything, Becca remembered his eyes. Bluer than the clearest summer sky, they sparkled and danced. He spared no glance at Becca. The stranger reined his horse in on the far riverbank.

He spoke, though it almost sounded like a song. "And who might you be, my pretty little miss?" Becca heard the words as though he had whispered in her ear.

Anna giggled like she was drunk. Indeed, she swayed. She replied in a sing-song voice, "My name is Anna. I'll be sixteen come Sunday."

The man smiled. "Would you come with me, pretty little miss? Come with me, my honey," he sang.

Anna nodded. The rider tapped his horse's flank and it stepped forward. Becca expected the current to snatch its forelegs but it stepped on the water like it was dry land. It trotted forward until it stood in the center of the fast-flowing river just before Anna, who struggled against the river's pull. The rider reached down and Anna leaped to grasp his hand. The man plucked her from the water and swung her into the saddle behind him. Anna's legs and dress were somehow completely dry. The girl slid her arms around his chest and closed her eyes, smiling as he resumed whistling. He wheeled his horse around and they crossed back over the river.

Becca couldn't tear her eyes away from the couple as they disappeared over the far hill. She watched them until the crest of the stranger's hat disappeared over the hill. The song lingered for a few moments and then faded, replaced by the chatter of birds and the hum of insects.

Becca's legs quivered and she felt a sudden shock of cold. Only then did she realize she was standing in the river past her knees and the current was threatening to sweep her downstream. She turned back to the shore and her eyes locked on the pair of boots nestled in the green grass like two white stones. She splashed from the river

and ran back up the trail. She slipped and fell in the mud twice as she raced to find Sam.

Becca found him behind the barn sharpening an axe on the grinding stone, hunched over his chore and peddling like mad. "Sam!" she cried as she came around the corner, and he jerked up, one hand on his chest.

"Damn it, woman, you nearly killed me."

"Sam, it's Anna. She's gone. He took her," Becca said between gasps.

"What? Who?"

"Black Jack Davy. He came and took her. Didn't you hear that song? It was like the whole world stopped."

"Have you gone mad, Becca?" he asked, looking at her filthy apron. "There ain't no Black Jack Davy."

"I saw him," she panted. "I saw him. He came down and took Miss Anna away."

"Becca," Sam said, dropping the axe and gripping her shoulders. "What's come over you? You been in the sun too long? There ain't no such thing. That's just an old wives' tale. I told Miss Anna I'd watch the child while she went for a walk. Hasn't even been an hour yet."

"Go look by the river. She left her boots."

"She was just going for a walk, Becca. You know those boots hurt her feet—"

"Damn it, Sam. I saw him. It was Black Jack Davy. He hauled her up on his horse and rode away."

Sam planted his hands on his hips. "Becca, if you saw her riding off with some stranger, why didn't you yell? Or try to stop them?"

Becca's mouth snapped shut. Just then, the baby's cries drifted out the ranch house window.

"You better hope that was some friend or relation of the girl's come to pay a visit. If some drifter came and took her like you say, I wouldn't brag too much that you saw the whole thing and didn't do nothing to stop it. That's liable to make the Boss real mad."

Becca stared at him. "I ... I tried to follow them."

"Yeah, well you better hope she comes back before sundown. Now you go in and get changed. You're a mess. And stop that baby from crying while Miss Anna's gone."

Sam ushered her into the house without another word. Becca cleaned herself off and tried to convince herself that maybe she had just been working too long and imagined the whole episode—but dream or no dream, she could not forget the song. Or those eyes! It wasn't the look of some fool boy's puppy love, or even those of a man in lust—they revealed something more, something deeper. It was almost as if those eyes showed what love was supposed to be, if you could distill it into something pure. That wasn't quite right and it didn't make sense to Becca, but her heart told her that's what true love looked like. She saw it in his eyes when he looked at Anna. And she'd seen it too in the girl's eyes.

Becca said nothing to Sam, not even when she passed him on the way back to the wash barrel. She noticed he kept creeping back into the yard to look down the trail, hoping to see the girl.

He looked more frequently as the bottom of the sun touched the horizon.

THE SUN HAD ALMOST SET WHEN THEY SAW THE BOSS RIDING down the twisting path. He slouched in the saddle just like he did every day, except today was different than the rest: today was the day his bride had run off. Becca bit off the urge to shout.

Sam limped up beside her and said in a low voice, "Now you just let me do the talking."

When he arrived in the yard, the Boss stood in the saddle and surveyed the ranch. "Where's the lady?"

"Well Boss—" Sam paused.

"She rode off with Black Jack Davy," Becca said and immediately regretted it. What if he heard the satisfaction in her voice?

Sam sighed. "She's been gone most the day, Boss. She asked me to look after the little one this morning but Becca here says she saw Miss Anna riding off with some gypsy character—"

"A gypsy? When?" His voice cracked like a whip. "Where?"

"Earlier this m-m-morning," she stammered. "They went west, across the river."

The Boss swung down from his saddle. Sam tried to speak but the Boss cut him off. "Saddle up Cutter," he ordered, his tone as cool and hard as a river rock.

"Maybe it was just a neighbor come to say hello—" Sam began.

"Do it!" Sam turned heel and limped as fast as he could to the stable.

The Boss looked at Becca, his eyes flaming. "What happened? Tell me. Quickly."

Becca's words stumbled over one another in their haste to get out. She left out the part about making the girl cry, the part about the song, and the part about the horse walking on water. She saw no need to make the situation any harder, so she only said she saw them on the far side of the river just as they crested the hill.

She finished just as Sam appeared with the horse. "So some gypsy has come to steal from me." He snatched the reins. He drew his revolver and inspected the chamber.

He pulled himself into the saddle and looked down at the two of them, standing close like a pair of scolded children. Cutter snorted and reared. "I'm bringing her back," he said and spurred the horse. They galloped toward the setting sun.

Becca and Sam stood in silence for a moment before he turned and cuffed her. "Why did you tell him that story for? The boss won't stand being talked to like he's some fool, you know. If he doesn't come back with her, Becca," he said, brandishing his finger in her face, "if he doesn't come back with her, you don't say another word about it. Ever. You just pretend she never existed, you hear me?"

"But Sam—"

"Becca, if that girl ran off and he can't find her, he won't want to be hearing no silly excuses. His pride's probably hurt enough, with her disobeying him. Your fool story will just make things worse."

Sam left without another word. Becca turned to the dried clothes but before she could take the first shirt off the line the baby began crying. She supposed it needed to be fed and changed and put to bed. She dropped her arms and shook her head. The damn laundry would have to wait.

NIGHT FELL BEFORE BECCA FINISHED WITH THE CLOTHES. Sam retired without any supper, so Becca set three places at the table and put the baby to sleep in its crib near the hearth. Seeing the Boss had sobered Becca up some. She expected him to burst through the door at any moment with his darling wife in one hand, a gypsy boy's head in the other. It seemed so silly now. Becca figured she'd overheated and fallen down; she'd dreamed up the whole thing, except maybe for the part about Anna riding off with some wanderer. The Boss would track them down just like he said he would, and he'd shoot that gypsy boy dead. She prepared some coffee, hanging the kettle on the hook near the fire. It was cold out and getting late. The Boss might want some hot coffee after a ride in the chill night air.

Becca's mind wandered as she built the fire. She imagined the Boss coming home empty-handed, that somehow the thief had escaped. Perhaps the Boss, during his long, cold ride home would understand that he'd been wrong to take such a young bride. He'd spoiled her with gifts and treated her like a princess, and what did that get him? Becca closed her eyes and her mind wandered farther as she prodded the logs with the poker. Perhaps, with his passions roused, he'd want more than a cup of coffee to warm his bones. Perhaps he'd see it was time for a more mature relationship. Perhaps. She leaned her head against the wall and drifted into a light, dreamless sleep.

The door banged open sometime later, jolting Becca awake and set her heart racing. It was the Boss. Becca sprang to her feet and instinctively smoothed her dress. The startled baby shrieked. The Boss threw his hat on the table and collapsed into his rocking chair by the fire. He leaned forward to warm his hands without a glance at Becca. She worked her hands, unsure of what was expected. He helped her: "Whiskey."

She ran to the cupboard and glanced around. He was alone. With trembling hands she reached for the bottle and poured an inch into the glass, spilling almost as much on her wrist. She wiped it on her apron as she brought the glass to him, peeking out into the empty, moonlit yard. He was alone.

He took the glass without looking up and frowned. "Bottle." She ran back to the cupboard as he knocked back the drink. The baby continued screaming. Sam had to be awake in his room with all this noise but he wasn't coming out.

She stood by the Boss as he took one, two, three long pulls from the bottle. She stood beside him, silent. Long minutes passed. The Boss took another long pull from the bottle. Becca absently rocked the cradle and the baby's cries died off. They watched the fire. When the logs were nearly gone, he motioned at the pile of wood near the fireplace and grunted. Becca dutifully knelt and began restocking the fire.

"She's gone,' he said to her back, his voice thick and tinged with whiskey.

Becca said nothing for a moment. "Gone?" she asked at last, her voice catching. "You didn't find her?"

He didn't respond for a few moments. Then he grunted. "I found her. Downriver." He slurred, "Spied her from the ridge top."

She hated to ask him but she felt she had to. She couldn't control herself. "Was she with him?" she asked. "I mean, with someone?"

The boss shook his head and took another long pull from the bottle and wiped his mouth. "If it hadn't been a full moon I wouldn't have seen her at all. I saw something white in the river. I rode closer and saw what it was—a glove caught in the branches of a downed tree. I crawled out on the branch as far as I could and then I could see. I could see her ... body beneath the water. It was like looking through a glass window."

Becca's breath rushed from her lungs.

"I almost fell in trying to rope her, what with the branches in the way, but I finally lassoed her hand. The river wanted to take her but I reeled her close and grabbed her hand. I could see her clearly. Her eyes were closed. She looked calm. Peaceful, even. Nothing like any dead body I've seen before. Then the glove slipped off her hand and the river swept her away. And now she's gone."

Becca stared into the fire and wrung her hands. He said nothing else for what seemed like forever. The silence was terrible.

"You said she didn't fight him, this man who took her?" he asked in a faraway voice. The firelight reflected in his eyes. "Maybe she wanted to go."

"Nonsense," Becca said. "You gave her everything. What else could she have wanted?" She paused, then added quietly, "I never had it so good."

The Boss said nothing. He was still looking deeply into the fire. She gazed at his face, flickering orange in the firelight. His tough exterior had dropped and for the first time she saw weakness there, a man who didn't understand what had happened or why. She wanted to comfort him, to hold him, to say that everything would be fine now that the fool girl was gone. She wanted to put her arms around him and tell him to forget that tramp, that she'd brought it on herself.

Something flew past her face and landed in the fireplace, kicking embers into the air. Becca yelped and fell back. The baby started into a fresh bout of shrieking. The fire hissed and spit. Becca stared into the flames and they were consuming a single leather glove.

The Boss stood on unsure legs and brushed past her. He unbuttoned his shirt as he staggered to the bedroom door. The baby spluttered, then resumed her wails. The Boss pulled his shirt off and threw it in his room. He turned back to her, the contours of his bare chest visible in the firelight.

"Becca," he said, his voice husky.

"Yes?" she asked. She took a step forward. Her heart pounded. He never used her name. She began to sweat.

"Becca," he said again, fumbling drunkenly for the words. He leaned one arm against the doorframe and rubbed his eyes. At last, he said, "Shut that fucking baby up. That'll be your responsibility from now on." He turned and shut the bedroom door.

She stood for a moment looking at the closed door and listening to the baby's incessant wail. Becca turned back to the hearth and, with a curse, threw the coffee on the fire, extinguishing the last glowing ashes before going to quiet the screaming child.

FOR THE REST OF THAT NIGHT, LONG AFTER THE BABY HAD been settled, Becca lay on her back, her hands folded on her stomach, and stared into the darkness. It was the girl's eyes that kept her awake, the look of them before she was swept away. The trust. The warmth. Becca never believed such a look could exist, but she hadn't believed a phonograph could speak until she'd finally seen a demonstration in Chicago. The words Bill had said that day circled in her head: "Now you've seen it, Becca. You satisfied?" Grudgingly, she had been. She even remembered her exact reply. She shook her head and said, "Will wonders never cease?"

In the dark, under the spell of the memory of those eyes, Becca's imagination began to work. She imagined the Boss kneeling before her, taking her hand, his head turned down, his face obscured by the brim of his hat. But she couldn't picture what he might say, or even where it would take place. In the yard? By the stream? It made no sense, held no power. She skipped to imagining a new man; a young hired hand coming to the ranch and the inevitable love affair that would ensue. The stolen glances across the supper table. The hidden smiles. The midnight meetings. This made little sense, but she at least allowed herself a smile even as she pushed the childish dream away. The Boss was more likely to come back from Helena toting a fresh new wife than some young stud looking for a wife.

Helena. The word stuck in her mind like a sliver. Becca saw herself walking through Helena's main street wearing a fine green dress, a parasol in her hand. That she could see. She imagined a man dressed in all white hurtling himself across the thoroughfare, so close to a horse team he causes them to rear up and he gets a good cussing from the driver. The man then stands before her, working the brim of his brilliantly white hat in his hands, his head slightly bowed. Her imaginary cowboy has dusty blond hair, tanned, slightly wrinkled skin dotted with stubble. Becca watches him, amused, as the man, who is far too old to be acting like a school boy, licks his lips and stammers. Before he can complete his greeting, she extends a lace-covered hand and with a smile says, "My name is Becca." The stranger looks up, returns a sheepish smile, and their eyes finally meet.

She skipped to imagining a new man; a young hired hand coming to the ranch and the inevitable love affair that would ensue. The stolen glances across the supper table. The hidden smiles. The midnight meetings.

Becca liked this dream, she liked it very much. She decided at that moment she wanted to go to Helena. She could make some pretense, some excuse the Boss couldn't refuse. If he did refuse and kept refusing, maybe she'd see if old Sam could teach her how to ride. It didn't seem that hard and, if she remembered correctly, the road to Helena was a straight shot.

Only when a tear streaked down her cheek did Becca realize her jaws were clenched and her hands were balled into fists. She scolded herself for getting carried away, letting her imagination trump her better sense. She told herself she's overtired, and that she'd think clearer in the light of morning.

Then, just before she dropped into sleep, she heard something outside. Her eyes flew open, her breath caught in her throat.

Even though it was only an hour before dawn, she distinctly heard a nightingale sing. ❧

RED

There it is again.

I lick my lips as I try to see who could be crying out there in the woods. Nana has no neighbors, not for miles. But the trees are too thick; all I see is summer green.

"Clara? Girl, did you hear me?"

"Yes, Nana. But I heard something else, too, something out there." I stretch my arm past the safety of the doorway, point out toward the darkness beyond the road. "Maybe a girl's lost her way."

A whisper in the air, like the wind trying to warn me. Then my bottom stings with sudden pain.

WE ALL KNOW NOT TO WANDER AROUND THE WOODS AT NIGHT WEARING A RED CLOAK—WE MIGHT RUN INTO THE WOLF. AND THAT WOULD BE BAD.

WOULDN'T IT?

BY JACKIE KESSLER ILLUSTRATION BY JADA FITCH

"HEED ME, CLARA." Nana bends down, just a little, to stand in front of me nose to nose. Her breath is terrible, full of garlic and other things to keep away the haunts. Her eyes are yellow, like a wolf's. Mama says that's nothing to fear, that Nana just has Old Person's eyes, but I don't believe her. Sometimes I think that Nana is really a monster, some nasty thing that ate my real Nana and wears her skin like clothes. "You don't go wandering in the woods. Not now, not ever. Never stray from the road."

Frowning, I rub my sore bottom. Nana's old, older than everyone, but her hands are as fast as Mama's when it comes to spanking. "But what if someone's lost?"

"That's not your concern," she says in a voice like a growl. "There's things out there, girl, things with teeth. You stay on the road, go straight home while the light's still good." She straightens and looks outside for a moment. "And if there is a child lost out there, then if God wills it, she'll find her way to the road."

I think of what it would be like to be stuck in the gloom of the forest, with nothing but greens and browns and other dirt colors for company, thinking of things that have teeth. "But Nana—"

"No buts," she says, swatting me again. "If I were in my health, I'd take you back home. But your Nana's old, girl. And I'm not meant to do such long walks." She sighs, making a sound like her tea kettle. "Go now." The stink of garlic makes my eyes water as she leans down for a kiss, which I give her quickly, not breathing through my nose. "I love you, Clara. Cover yourself good; there's a chill in the air."

I tell Nana that I love her too, and I wrap the white folds of my cloak around my shoulders before I step away from her cottage. My basket, now empty except for two bulbs of garlic, begs to be filled with wild flowers. I know better than to stop anywhere near Nana's, so I walk for a count of one hundred, not straying from the road.

As I stop to pick some daffodils, I hear it again. It's a cry, I'm sure—a girl sobbing. Maybe crying for her own Mama.

I think about things with teeth. Then I decide that the garlic from Nana's house is strong enough to keep away all haunts and other nasty things that would try to eat me, so I step away from the road and into the green of the woods. The light is good, and I keep to the rays shining between the vast trunks. And soon I see a boy.

He's walking around one tree, stopping after a complete circle, then walking around it again. The boy's hair is long, tangled with leaves and twigs, and he wipes his nose the way I do when runners of snot dribble out when I cry. At first I think he's covered in a cloak of fur, but as my eyes adjust to the shade from the leafy roof above us, I realize he's full of hair. Even Papa's back isn't so furry. Under all that thick hair, he's naked. And filthy.

He sees me and freezes mid-pace. His eyes are wide, maybe because he's scared, and his mouth is open in an O. I think he's going to jackrabbit into the deeper forest, so I call out, "Are you lost?"

Snuffling, he nods. He blinks, then tilts his head and looks me up and down. In a voice hoarse from crying, he asks, "What are you?" His accent is thick, making his words run together like water.

"Me?" What a silly question. "I'm just a girl."

"Girl," he says, but it comes out almost like "Jill." He drags his arm under his nose again. "Never seen one before."

"Never?" I laugh, just a little, because I can't imagine living in a place without any girls. "Well, I've never seen dirty naked boys before. Doesn't your mama dress you?"

"Mama," he says like a sob. "I lost my mama."

"Well, come on, then," I say, offering my hand. "We're not going to find her here in the woods. Let's go to the road."

He blinks again, then walks up to me slowly, taking big, springy steps like a cat. He sniffs my hand. His tongue pokes out, and he licks my fingers.

"Stop that," I giggle, pulling my hand away. "You don't lick people's fingers!"

"No?" His brown eyes are puzzled. "Why?"

"Because ..." I realize I don't have a good answer, so I give him a grown-up reason. "Because it's just not done. Now come on. Here." I unfasten my white cloak and drape it over his shoulders. "Pull it tight around you. It'll keep you warm."

"Nice," he murmurs, rubbing his cheek against the heavy velvet. Nana made my riding cloak for me when I turned eight. It still fits, even though it's a bit short now, and the hood is much too small. We walk slowly to the road, him nearly tripping on my heels. But before we leave the shelter of the woods, he straightens and sniffs the air.

Grinning big enough to flash his teeth, he says, "There! Mama's up ahead!" With that, he bolts off to the right, into the dark of the forest, my cloak flapping around him like bird's wings.

"Come back!" I shout, but he's gone. Shivering, I think about going after him, but now it's starting to get dark, and even though I have wool for brains (so Mama tells me), even I know that you don't go into the woods in the dark. So I go back to the road and head home, running to keep warm.

I'M HALFWAY TO NANA'S when I hear someone call out from the woods. "Jill?"

Turning, I see the boy from the other day, standing near the road. He's clean now, but he's still naked, covered in thick hair like fur. The snarls and bits of leaf are gone from his hair, which I see is a beautiful black, like a raven's crest. In his hands is my cloak. "I have your clothes. From before."

I'm relieved to see my cape again. Mama barely believed me when I said I had left it at Nana's, but what else could I do? If I had told her that I'd given it to a naked boy in the forest, Mama would've beaten me raw. And Papa would've set to the woods with his gun. I take the cloak from him and stuff it into my basket. "I'm happy you found your mama. Was she angry with you?"

He laughs, almost like a bark. "Oh, she was mad! She chased me around the trees and bit me until I bled! But she was just scared. You know." Then he looks at me. "You do know, don't you? Do Jills have mamas?"

"I have a mama. And a papa. I even have a nana," I add proudly, "but she lives up the road from us."

He nods. "My mama was mad that you helped me. She said I'll

"THE WORLD HAS OPENED ITSELF TO ME. THE SMELLS OF THE WIND, THE ODOR OF THE EARTH—ALL PALE BEFORE THE SCENT OF LIFE, OF PEOPLE, OF YOU. YOU LEAVE ME, AND YOU BATHE AWAY THE DAY'S PLAY AND YOU SMELL OF NOTHING BUT YOUR SOAP. BUT YOU'VE LEFT YOUR SCENT DEEP INSIDE OF ME. YOU'RE ON EVERYTHING I TOUCH. MY WORLD IS YOU ..."

never learn my way if I let others lead me." Then softly he says, "But I was so scared. I didn't know which way to go. And I've heard stories of monsters outside of the woods."

"Things with teeth," I say, remembering Nana's words.

"Things with thundersticks," he says. He cocks his head at me. "Do you have thundersticks?"

Frowning, I shake my head. "I don't even know what a thunderstick is."

His face splits into a huge grin. "See? I knew you were good. No thundersticks! You gave me warmth, and you helped me find my mama. You're a good Jill." Then his grin crumples. "But Mama says I'm not allowed to run with you."

"Why not?" I ask, feeling excited and sad and angry all at the same time.

"Because you're a Jill," he says, shrugging. Then he leans in close. "But I think that if we run in secret, then our mamas will never know."

I clap my hands. "I love secrets! Yes, let's be secret friends."

"Friends," he agrees. He sniffs at me. "I can't lick your fingers, you said. What do Jill's friends do?"

"Do? I don't know. We just play."

"Play," he says, nodding. "Yes, play. Good." He takes a step backward, back into the woods. "I can't stay now. But we will see each other again, along the road."

"Wait," I say as he turns. "I don't know your name."

"Name?" He laughs. "I am Udolf. And you are Jill."

He lopes away before I can tell him my name is Clara.

"YOU'RE OLDER," I tell Udolf. We're sitting near the road, sprawled on my old cloak like a blanket.

"Sure," he agrees. He cocks his head the way he always does when he's puzzled by something. "You are too."

"No, not just that." I look at him closely. In the two years we've been meeting to play in secret, I've gotten bigger, of course. I'm nearly twelve. But Udolf isn't just bigger. He's older. Gone is the thin, furry boy lost in the woods. His hair is still long, and magnificently blue-black, like captured midnight. But the person sitting across from me is almost a man. "You're grown up."

He shrugs, causing his rough shirt to shift up and then settle back down. He started wearing clothes last year. Nothing that would impress my mama, just simple wool shirts and trousers. I think he puts them on just for me, and then sheds them as soon as I take my leave. I've never asked, and he's never told. But the way he wears the clothes—uncomfortable, like he's in his Sunday best instead of a pauper's richest—tells me more than his words ever could. And he doesn't wear shoes. "It's the way of things. My people mature faster than yours."

"Your people," I scoff, "had never seen girls before me."

He grins at the old joke. "You're my first Jill," he says, the same reply he's given for these two years.

"So what should we do today?" I ask, stretching my arms high. "Chase rabbits? Name the trees?"

He blinks at me, then sighs. "No," he says, somewhat sadly. "Those aren't as much fun for me anymore."

"No?" I frown up at him. "Then what?"

He looks at me, and for a moment, his eyes shine as brightly as a bird's. There's an amber gleam to them that reminds me of Nana. The look passes, leaving his face bare, stripped. "I don't know," he sighs. "I just don't know."

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," I say again. My voice is thick in my throat, and I can feel my heart breaking. "Why don't you want to see me anymore?"

Udolf chuffs, "You're not listening. I want to, but I can't."

"Why?" I stamp my foot on the hard clay of the road. I know it's childish, especially now that I'm almost thirteen, but I can't help it. "Aren't we still friends?"

"You will always be my first Jill," he says, refusing to come out from the shadow of the elm tree, "but no, we cannot still be friends."

"But why?"

"Because I'm fully grown." He paws at his plain shirt. "Trappings of childhood aren't enough anymore. Mama was right. I never should have run with you."

"You're not making sense!" Furious, wanting to hit and kick and shriek, I hurl my basket at him. It smacks his tree and bounces to the ground. His eyes never leave mine.

"The world has opened itself to me," he says, his voice rumbling deep in his chest. "The smells of the wind, the odor of the earth—all pale before the scent of life. Of people." He shivers, just a little, and he wraps his arms around himself. "Of you. You leave me, and you bathe away the day's play, and you smell of nothing but your soap. But you've left your scent deep inside of me. You're on everything I touch. My world is you—and you're just a Jill. A girl," he says distinctly, like a growl.

"I'm almost a woman," I counter, desperate. "Isn't that enough? Can't we be grown-ups and still be friends?"

"No," he rasps, looking like he wants to say "yes." "No," he says again. "Your kind and mine cannot grow up together. It's not in our natures."

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them away. "Udolf," I say, his name a beacon for my broken heart, "please don't leave me."

"I'll watch you as you walk your path. But you are Jill, and I am Udolf." And he disappears, running into the maw of the forest. His name echoes in the mournful autumn breeze, and I hear it still as I collect my broken basket.

"JILL."

My heart quickens as I turn to see Udolf at the edge of the road. He's tall and broad, clad only in the dark fur of his body. His silky black hair cascades around his face, and his eyes dance.

I lower my hood away from my face. "Udolf," I say, trying to be cold and wanting to run to him.

"You … look well," he says, his voice husky. Thick.

"Thank you." It has been more than a year since I've seen him, and though there is a rift of time and unforgiven hurt between us, all I can think of is the feel of his hand in mine as we would chase rabbits through the woods.

"The color suits you."

I touch the collar of my new cloak, Nana's birthday gift to me. Scarlet as a robin, proud as a jaybird, the cape and hood are the softest velvet. "White was for a child," I say. "Now I'm a woman."

"Yes," he breathes. "Even as your kind measures it, yes." He sniffs, inhaling deeply. "A woman."

Swallowing, I thumb the material of the cloak, seeking comfort. I had never been afraid of Udolf before. But now—now there was something different about him. A wildness. A spice of danger.

And somewhere deep inside me, I felt that same spice. It riddled my blood, turned my world red.

"Would you come to me now?" he asks, extending his hand to me like he would to a lost child. "Would you run with me?"

Wanting to scream, needing to touch him, all I can do is nod mutely. I reach out to him, take a step off the path.

In my mind, Nana scolds me, her shrill voice huge, insistent. You never stray from the road!

"You look beautiful, Clara," Udolf says. "Ravishing."

I blush at the unexpected use of my real name, and Nana's warning is blown away like a house of straw. I'm not a Jill anymore. "Do I? Really?"

He smiles, and for a moment all I can see is the gleam of his teeth. Then his hand catches mine, swallows it whole. "You look good enough to eat."

YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ASSUME, RIGHT? YES, THERE'S THE OBVIOUS. BUT THERE ARE FAR WORSE THINGS THAN MAKING "AN ASS OF U AND ME."

Bottles

BY SAMANTHA HENDERSON
ILLUSTRATION BY TONY SHASTEEN

SOME SHE FOUND IN OLD DIGS, AND THERE'S ALWAYS A LINE OF THEM in antique shop windows: one for a dollar. I used to buy one for her every week, coming home from grocery shopping, but that was before Marc left. Now dollars are harder to come by.

There's the tiny perfume bottles, fluted and delicate, and the older drug store bottles, crusted with lime and iridescent where the impurities in the glass have oxidized. Some have names like "McKeller's Universal Remedy." The biggest one is brown, flat like a flask, and it towers over the others like a maternal sentinel. My favorite has a long neck and a square base: age and burial have given it a lovely green-gold sheen. It has no brand name, only units of measurement up the side, so I think it must have held medicine.

Back when I had time to decorate I found an old shelf and painted it pink, to match the rest of the pink trimmings in her room, and mounted it on the wall to hold her collection.

It can't last much longer, these pink ruffles and lilac curtains and Strawberry Shortcake pillows. She's twelve, after all. Soon she'll be asking to paint the walls midnight blue and hanging rock star posters everywhere.

I was so tired that day. Somewhere between the laundry room and the kitchen, three days of back-to-back ICU shifts, plus subbing a CPR certification class, plus the prospect of a week's deferred house cleaning hit me like a ton of bricks and I had to sit down. I leaned against her pink ruffled pillows and rested my head.

SHASTEEN

If I went to sleep, if I napped, my schedule would be off and I can't have that. When you're single, with a mortgage and a kid, taking whatever overtime you can, schedules are everything. You'll find that out if you're ever in my shoes.

Don't assume you won't be.

Never assume.

My eyes wandered the rows of bottles on the wall. She liked to rearrange them every week or so. Now the cobalt blues were in back, with the big brown one, and the iridescent whites and greens alternated in front.

Something—a moth, perhaps—fluttered behind them.

I hoped it wasn't a spider. I always had to get Marc to take the spiders out of the house. He refused to kill them.

Now he was taking spiders out for Jessie. Or would be, if she hadn't ...

I tried not to let myself think about Jessie. It made me angry, and it's not good for me to get angry.

Everybody thinks I took it so well, the breakup, so understanding of Marc's, what? Middle-age crisis?

So considerate, never angry or shrill. I know some thought me passive, uncaring. As if I couldn't care for Marc. As if I didn't still love him with all the pathetic puppy love a plain girl has for the Homecoming King.

But it's not good for me to get angry.

I stared at the bottles a while, glazed with exhaustion, then realized.

The movement was inside the bottles.

I got up and approached them carefully, as if something might leap out at me.

One bottle, one of the smaller white ones, spun inside, as if it imprisoned a tiny universe.

Three other bottles held ... faces. Or, rather, parts of faces, parts that moved over and under and even through each other.

One moved very slowly. An old man's face. Two eyes, shut fast, approximately where you would expect to find eyes. An enormous nose floating between them. And a mouth, turned down at the corners, that sometimes moved up to bump the nose and sometimes wandered over to the side. It seemed to be drowsing.

Another face, in a pale green bottle, was all eyes and crisp red mouth, spinning round and round each other so fast it made me dizzy. One bright eye saw me and slowed a moment, floating as if in a thick liquid, and it looked like it might wink. Then it was off, pirouetting with the other eye and the mouth.

I think it was a face in the cobalt blue bottle. The glass was so dark it was hard to see, and it hid in the back, behind the others. Perhaps eyes, still and staring, perhaps a mouth, open in a noiseless scream. A black braid was wound around the rusty, corroded lid of the bottle, too glossy to be thread. I leaned as close as I dared. It looked like five or six strands of black hair. Hair as black as ebony.

I heard the door slam. She was home from school. "Cheyenne," I called, and I don't think my voice trembled. "Could you come here a minute?"

"I'm here," she said at the door. I saw her leaning against the cracked paint of the jam, her chin tucked into her neck, eyes wavering between rebellion and apprehension, her lips in a preteen pout, and I know it wasn't my imagination, wasn't some kind of joke, and she had a lot of explaining to do.

She wasn't so old yet that I couldn't make her cuddle up against me, so we sat on the bed, facing the bottles, my arm around her shoulders and not moving for a few minutes until I thought she understood that I was not angry.

"Cheyenne," I began, because you have to begin somewhere. "Tell me about the bottles. This one." I pointed to a bottle, frosted by lime, full of a dusty swirl, like a little, lazy tornado. I wasn't ready to hear about the faces yet.

"Ah." She smiled, and hopped off the bed. She groped under her bed, amid the litter of storage boxes and dust bunnies and mismatched shoes and emerged with a shoebox. Something heavy slid inside.

She opened the lid, and a musky animal smell came out. But not, as I feared, the smell of death.

Something brown and gray and furry. A squirrel, identical to the dozens of squirrels that visited our backyard every fall, vacationing from the woods behind, chattering like mad at us, the dog, each other.

It lay with its paws tucked beneath its chin, its tail tucked neatly against its back legs. Its eyes seemed closed at first, but looking closer I saw the black glitter of its eyes, slitted beneath the lids.

Cautiously I touched its white, furry belly. It was warm and solid to the touch. When it didn't move I left two fingers there until I felt a heartbeat. Instead of that rapid patter of a small animal I felt a slow, occasional thump.

"Why is it like that?" I asked.

"Because ..." She looked at the bottles, angling her head so her bangs hung over her eyes.

"How long?" I said.

She put the box back on the bed and wouldn't look at me. "Over a month," she said.

"A month?"

"Well, a month and a half, maybe." She reached out to stroke the squirrel's soft fur. "That's the longest so far."

"So far."

"I wasn't going to keep it here. I had two of them: another squirrel, and I put them under the house, through the broken screen. I thought they'd be OK in the boxes."

"Something got the other one?"

She looked at me, her eyes narrowed, and I felt myself EXAMINED, like an insect under a microscope.

She grimaced. "Cats."

"Ah." I never liked cats much. Dogbert kept them out of the yard most of the time, but they got under the house on the driveway side, and fought and peed and had babies.

I nodded at the bottles again, with a clinician's interest. "What happened when ..."

She jumped up and fetched a bottle—the twin of the one that held the squirrel's—what? Spirit? She uncapped it and emptied the contents into the lid of the shoebox. A thimbleful of gray power spilled out. It had a faint, acrid odor.

"The squirrel." I said. "The live—sort of live—one. How do you feed it?"

"I don't." She picked it up and cradled it carefully against her, and I bit my lip to keep from ranting about fleas and bubonic plague.

"Nothing goes in and nothing comes out. I don't feed it and it doesn't even pee. I don't think it's breathing. Just the heartbeat. Did you feel how slow it was?"

"Yes. Please put that thing away, Cheyenne."

She shrugged and put it gently back in the box. The creature seemed to flash me a look under its hooded eyes and I shuddered.

Cheyenne took the lid, looked at the gray dust, then at me.

"Outside," I said. "Toss it to the wind. Maybe ..." I left the thought unsaid. We already hashed out Squirrel Heaven eight years ago.

"Cheyenne," I began. "How did you ... did you learn to do this? Or can you ... just do it?"

I felt a green thread of envy. She was only twelve. What could I have done, if I had ...

Well, too late for second guessing myself.

She crossed her legs.

"It was about three years ago. I thought I needed glasses, at first. I was going to tell you but, well, I didn't want glasses."

I nodded. I got migraines using the computer now, because I didn't want glasses.

"But I figured out it only happened when I looked at people, and animals. Living things. Not trees or flowers, I mean."

"What happened?"

She drew her lower lip back between her teeth. "I started to see them ... overlapping, I guess. An extra shape around the shape of a person. Or an animal. Like heat. Like heat on a hot road. When it looks like a puddle of water."

"Does it have a color?"

"No." She shook her head, still sucking in her lip. "Just ... wobbly."

"Do you see it around everyone?"

"Yes."

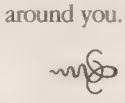
"Do you see it around me?"

She looked at me, her eyes narrowed, and I felt cold. Examined. Like an insect under a microscope. Something that was mine, something attached to me begin to pull away, like dead skin over a blister. The cold feeling grew.

"Cheyenne," I said, warningly. I wasn't trying, but the lamp on the bedside table started to quiver.

Her eyes widened and became warm again. Warmth filled me like a blush. I took a deep breath, and the lamp stilled.

"Yes," she said. "I see it around you. I see it around everybody."



"I used to practice on people in the library," she told me later, in the kitchen. Four little bottles full of imponderables sat on the table in front of us, along with the Bryer's Mint Chip. We often had ice cream in the kitchen when the evenings were too hot to sleep. It was the most normal thing we did since Marc left.

When I had Cheyenne I was a half-year short of a nursing degree. Marc's leaving meant I had to finish it, fast. I took courses when Cheyenne was in school, picked her up and split a Big Mac and fries, then took her back to U. for my night course. I left her in the library every night with her homework and a prayer. Finished up in four months. Now I worked free-lance: I liked the flexibility and the money was better, as long as Marc kept paying our insurance premiums. I wondered how long it would take for Jessie to put a stop to that.

Not that she was in any condition to do anything, nowadays.

"You practiced," I said. "What does that mean, exactly?"

She giggled, sputtering green. "Practiced seeing it. What was around people."

I waited. Because of my impatience, I've learned to be patient. Because I am angry, I've learned to be gentle.

"I found out I could kind of suck out the wobbly thing I see around people, around living things. It was like a rubber band. If I stopped, if I didn't put it anywhere, it snapped right back. Then I figured out if I could get it into something like a bottle, it might stay there. 'Cause glass is like, impermeable, and nonreactive."

God bless sixth-grade science.

"Did you start with the squirrels?"

She nodded. "And Dogbert."

"What?" I looked around for the old golden retriever, asleep on his mat. He snored, reassuringly.

She grinned, chocolate specks between her teeth. "Just a little. Just to see if I could get it in the bottle and back again. He was sleepy all day."

"This was about a month ago?" She nodded. "I remember."

Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "Well," she said primly, scooping up the last bit of melted ice cream. "You wouldn't want me to experiment on people first, would you? That wouldn't be right."

"OK, Cheyenne." The dishes were rinsed in the sink, and it was time to get down to business. "Tell me about the faces."

She leaned over and tapped the bottle that held the slumberous face of an old man.

"Mr. Murphy," she said.

It took me a second to understand.

"Mr. Murphy? My patient? You're putting my patients' souls in bottles?"

Behind me I heard the dishes rattle in the sink. I took a deep breath, and they stilled.

"Well," she said, in a very small voice. "He was dying anyway. Wasn't he?"

Three weeks ago. One of my clients, a terminal-care nursing home, called me in at the last minute to cover a sick night shift nurse. The money was too good to turn down, so I said I'd do it if Cheyenne could come and read at the Nurses' Station; it was too short notice to get a sitter. They knew her, knew she was quiet, and said that was fine.

Mr. Murphy was dying: had sunk into a coma a few days before. It was rather a mystery, at this point, why he had lasted so long.

Now I knew why.

"Cheyenne, first thing tomorrow we are taking that bottle back and releasing Mr. Murphy's soul, or spirit, or essence, or whatever the heck that is."

She nodded, her lower lip trembling. I looked at the bottle with the zippity-do-da eyes and the eager mouth and put two and two together.

"Mrs. Simpson, right?" I said in a softer voice. "Cheyenne, that's just greedy. And Mrs. Simpson's family is very upset, and I don't blame them. She was doing very well until a few weeks ago, until you ... you know. The doctors are very puzzled about it."

Cheyenne looked at the bottle and the sparkling eyes watched her closely.

"She tells me stories. At night, sometimes, when I can't sleep, I take her bottle to bed with me and she tells me about when she was a girl, on the farm, the things she'd do. Silly stories. Boring, I guess. But I like to hear them. I think she likes to tell them, too. No one else listens to her, not anymore."

Mrs. Simpson's eyes looked at Cheyenne. They were so bright they looked full of tears, which was impossible.

I was scared to ask. I nodded at the fourth bottle, the one with the familiar, glossy strands wrapped around the neck.

Cheyenne's shoulders slumped.

"Jessie," I said for her.

She nodded.

"You used her hair."

"I got it from her brush."

Shit. Jessie.

Jessie, Jessie, Jezebel.

The woman who stole my Marc.

The woman who ruined our lives.

The woman who had fallen over in her kitchen two weeks ago, and still hadn't woken up. Just after Marc's weekend.

The woman in the bottle.

Fucking Sleeping Beauty.

I know, blame the woman. I usually don't act like that. But you

have to understand how sweet and stupid Marc is.

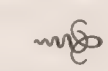
She didn't have to take him. She was pretty, small-town pretty in a black-haired, blue-eyed way. Deep blue eyes, cobalt blue almost, like some of Cheyenne's bottles. Fair skin, with a pretty scattering of freckles across a perfect nose, and a classically shaped mouth, lips naturally red, if a little thin. Lovely curves, with hips unsplayed by childbearing.

Oh yes, I had reason to study her closely.

She could've had all sorts of men, two or three, even. She didn't have to take mine. She didn't have to take my daughter's father.

I can't afford to hate Marc. I have his child. I have his hairs in an old brush. I'm sure I could find his toenail clippings in a corner somewhere. There's too much I could do to him.

Like I said, it's not good if I get angry. I've known that ever since I almost smashed in Mr. Jaake's skull.



Mr. Jaake, ninth-grade algebra. I was in his office for some reason: I can't tell you why. Maybe I smarted off at him, maybe I was just so frustratingly clueless he snapped. Maybe my expression reminded him of his ex-wife. Anyway, what was supposed to be a student conference turned into a one-sided screaming match, with him calling me stupid and me glaring at him with a sulky teenage glower.

I remember looking at his turkey-red face, the tiny spot of spit that stuck to the corner of his mouth, and feeling an icy disdain. I remember hearing every word he said, but from far away. I remember seeing him spinning at the end of a long, gray tunnel.

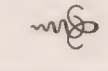
And this I remember too: as I looked at him, feeling my body grow cold, I saw the heavy clay pot that lived in the corner of his office shift silently, and rise up, and float head-high, and hover behind him. I knew with a squeeze of my mind I could smash it into the back of his skull, shattering it like glass.

And, knowing that, I made the pot sink back down to the floor. He never saw it. I made myself breathe deeply. I made myself think of the sound of rain padding against the roof on a windy night. That sound has always calmed me.

I made myself think of the rain a lot over the years. Especially when I felt that coldness, saw people at the end of the gray tunnel, and knew things were starting to rise up like drops of water on the Space Shuttle.

Rain. Falling. Breathe.

That's better.



Two weeks ago. Cheyenne had been quiet, mopey the day she got back from Marc's. Marc and Jessie's, that is. But that's not unusual, and I gave her a few days to get over it.

Wednesday Marc called, his urbane voice squeaky from sustained panic.

"Mira," he croaked. "Something's happened to Jessie."

And why do I care about Jessie, Jessie, Jezebel, who ruined my home and makes my daughter sad and sulky two weeks of every four and did it without even breaking a sweat, my beautiful, stupid Prince Charming? I didn't say that, because long ago I knew that if I started talking like that my barriers would break down, one by one, Mr. Jaake's head would be caved in by a flower pot, and I wouldn't even care.

So I breathed, and thought of the rain.

"What happened, Marc?"

"She's in some sort of coma. She was standing in the kitchen, and her eyes sort of rolled up in her head, and she just fell over."

"Did you call an ambulance?"

The squeak went away. "Of course I did, Mira. I'm not an idiot."

Oh, but you are, my love. You're a plump dodo bird in a room full of cats.

"What did they say?"

"They didn't. They have no idea. Maybe diabetic shock, although she's never been diabetic. They thought it might be an aneurysm at first. But now they say they don't know."

"Where is she?"

"Cottage Main. I just came home to get some of her things, in case ... in case she wakes up."

"Cottage is an excellent hospital, Marc. I'm sure she'll be just fine."

"Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

"Well, people collapse sometimes. I'm not an expert."

I wondered if he thought I'd offer to come rushing over, to barge in at Cottage and take over her care, to drop everything I'd built up so carefully.

Probably not. Not even Marc is that stupid.

"Why now?" My voice sounded calm. "Did something happen? Did she do something to you?"

I heard the dishes rattle again and did not care.

She shook her head.

"She scared me this time."

"What did she do?"

The sound of a bowl shattering.

"Nothing ... she never does anything. She's always ... nice, I guess."

Marc insisted that Jessie was wonderful to Cheyenne.

"It was the way she looks at me, out of the corners of her eyes. Like she hates me. And sometimes, when she hugs me, or passes close by, she squeezes me too hard, or knocks into me. Like, accidentally on purpose. She only did it sometimes before, but now ... it's all the time."

"I see."

We sat there, in each other's quietness, a long time. I listened for any sound from the bottles. There was none.

"Bedtime, Cheyenne."

"What about ..." she nodded at the center of the table.

"They go back tomorrow." I gathered them up, cool in my hands. I didn't like to touch the cobalt blue one.

"Can I have Mrs. Simpson?"

"She has to go back."

"Just for the night, I mean. Just for one last story."

I was going to say no. Mrs. Simpson's eye hovered below her red mouth, bright and eager.

I handed the bottle over. "One more night."

I had a shift at the nursing home the next day, so I took all three bottles jangling in my pocket and released Mr. Murphy first. Nothing happened when I took off the rusty top: no diaphanous soul-smoke, no ectoplasm. But on the bed the old man shifted and sighed once. I heard he passed away later that night.

I did the same for Mrs. Simpson. She stirred, and muttered "in the hayrick, and the eggs all broke ..." and fell into a true sleep.

At Cottage Main, I was careful to drop by at visiting hours, when I knew Marc would probably be there. If the station nurse hadn't told me he was there I wouldn't have gone in. I'm a trained nurse, with access to all kinds of drugs: no way I'm going to be alone with the woman who stole my husband. The helpless, pretty wife, with skin as white as snow, hair as black as a crow's wing, and lips as red as blood. And me with my poisoned apples. I know who's the wicked witch here.

He was there, all right, sitting in the puke orange visitor's chair, reading the sports section. Jessie looked very small in the bed, very harmless, a spill of black hair escaping to flow down the pillow. A cozy domestic scene.

He saw me and jumped to his feet, folding the paper and tucking it under his arm in one smooth motion.

"Mira," he said, and my heart turned over. Stupid man, but I was stupider, because I still loved him.

I knew what it was, I knew it was foolish, but it was love, nevertheless. People live many years with worse wounds than mine.

I stayed on the other side of the room, away from Jessie. "Have they told you anything yet?"

I would've asked the attending, who I knew from other hospitals, but I didn't want to show any undue interest.

Marc talked, and I didn't listen. I rolled the bottle round and round in my pocket. It was heavier than the others, and not as cool.

I knew all I had to do was pop the top off. Didn't even have to take it out of my pocket.

I looked at her one last time and then I saw it, the glitter beneath the half-closed eyelids. Beautiful eyes, blue as the jar in my pocket. So that's what remains of you, Jessie Jezebel, when your soul is gone.

Squeezes me too hard. Knocks into me. Accidentally on purpose.

Marc was an insect buzzing in my ear. I felt very cold.

I liked feeling cold.

A TV was bolted into the ceiling, not far from the foot of the bed. It looked very heavy. It started to vibrate. A fine dust started to sift from the tiles where it was attached.

I heard Marc finish: "... appreciate it, Mira," and it was like my ears had popped.

Breathe. Rain.

The TV stopped vibrating.

"I hope everything works out, Marc," I said, and walked away quickly. He said something else, but I didn't stop to hear it. The bottle in my pocket was getting warmer and warmer.

I didn't schedule anything the next day, Friday, and when they called I said I was booked with a private patient (never, never get a rep for taking days off) and the next morning, before Cheyenne woke up, I made a stack of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and wrapped them in wax paper.

She came stumbling into the kitchen in her pajamas, half awake, and watched me slice the crusts off the bread.

"I called you in sick today," I told her. I took a bunch of grapes from where they'd been draining in the sink.

"Hhmmm?" she said, because she is not a morning person and doesn't become coherent for an hour or so after waking. I was never a morning person either, until I had to be: had to be up and perky and ready to absorb a ward's worth of charts with an enthusiasm that still strikes me as false, like laughing heartily when the man who fetched your plate at the buffet tells the world's worst joke.

"Called the school." I wrapped the last sandwich and put it next to the others in my backpack. "You have a 24-hour flu."

I had made sun tea the day before, and sniffed at the jar before pouring it into the thermos. Didn't seem too stale.

"Flu?" said Cheyenne.

"Wake up, sunshine." I opened the cupboard door and searched for the untouched bag of potato chips I'd been avoiding for a week. "Get dressed. We're going on a picnic.

"Bring the squirrel and the bottle with you," I called after her.

Out our back door, past our back gate, there's an easement, a right-of-way that takes you, if you go far enough, through a meadow and up Lone Oak Hill. About an hour and a half hike, if you're in shape.

I love our house. I hope I can keep up the payments by myself long enough.

I wouldn't let Dogbert come, and he stood watching at the gate, wagging his tail reproachfully.

We made it to the Lone Oak before the sun was overhead. Lone Oak is not the only oak on the hill, but it stands apart from the others, as near the summit as no matter.

It looked at us for a minute or so, its little paws tucked under its chin, before leaping about a foot in the air and darting away to the nearby trees.

Cheyenne panted a little, and grumbled a little, but didn't ask why we were here.

We had our picnic, and Cheyenne took out the squirrel and opened its bottle. It stirred and gave a tiny sneeze. We couldn't help laughing.

It looked at us for a minute or so, its little paws tucked under its chin, before leaping about a foot in the air and darting away to the nearby trees.

"Probably going to get eaten before nightfall," said Cheyenne.

"That's the natural fate of squirrels," I said.

After we wrapped up our trash and bundled it into my backpack, I took out the little spade I'd brought and began to dig, right next to the Lone Oak. The ground was fairly soft and loamy for a foot or so, then began to get hard-packed and full of little roots. Cheyenne didn't ask what I was doing, but she did offer to dig a while.

"No," I said, wiping the sweat out of my eyes. I felt the dirt on my forehead. "This has nothing to do with you."

"But ..."

"Nothing."

She was quiet then.

She was very quiet all the way home.

She didn't say much the first few days.

I expected that.

Jessie didn't die right away. After several days of no discernible brain activity Marc consented to having her life support removed. She lasted far longer than they thought she would, even with no nutrients. The faint, slow heartbeat continued a week and more before it finally faded.

If it did fade.

Marc was devastated, of course. And I was very sympathetic. I didn't rush to his side, of course. That would have been suspicious, and impolitic. But I did agree to help him with the arrangements for the memorial service, although I did not attend. And he has asked me to come along with Cheyenne for a day or so when he has her for his two weeks this summer, at his timeshare at Mendocino.

Of course I'll stay in Cheyenne's room, because Jessie's still a little fresh in her grave.

I wish I could be sure she was actually dead when they buried her.

I'm sure some people suspect something, but they'll never prove anything: they can't. Best they could ever do is prove I buried a bottle on Loan Oak Hill, on a picnic with my daughter. Just an old bottle. No harm in that.

Things will take their course. I've learned to be patient. There's no need to hurry, now I'm sure of him

I never said I was a nice woman.

Don't assume you wouldn't do the same.

Never assume. ❧

LYRICAL LINES

Taking a vacation from superheroes, P. Craig Russell allows the music to be his muse when adapting the great operas for graphic novels.

BY KAREN HABER

AWARD-WINNING ARTIST P. CRAIG RUSSELL DIDN'T PLAN TO ADAPT great operas into graphic novels. Back in 1976, he was busy drawing superheroes for Marvel Comics and feeling a bit restless artistically when he saw a script for a comic book based on Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, written by childhood friend Patrick Mason.

It intrigued him.

"I knew Wagner's Ring Cycle but I didn't know *Parsifal*," Russell recalls. "I was just looking for a good story, outside of urban superheroes, something where I could get a little challenged, perhaps even draw some trees. Although I had always loved opera, I hadn't thought of adapting it.

"But I thought this was an interesting script. A friend of mine was starting a comic book company—Star*Reach—and I had pretty much free range to do anything at all."

The graphic novel of *Parsifal* was a hit, and Russell spent the eighties drawing superheroes by day and doing his personal work at night. Next came freelancing, and by 2005, he had adapted *Salome*, *The Magic Flute*, and many other operas, culminating in Wagner's titanic *Ring*, all to great acclaim.

Russell finds nothing odd in the gods of Wagner's Ring Cycle appealing to comic book readers. "*Siegfried* is a superhero comic. Costume drama is costume drama, whether the characters can fly or just wield a magic sword or spear. So many of them have these super magical powers. I know that superheroes in comics are identified with the modern world, but actually, they're kind of an anomaly. They fit better into myth, with the Nibelung. They're not out of place."

Happily for the artist, with fantasy comes freedom. "If you're doing a mythic city, you can combine fantasy with gothic castles, buddhist monasteries, and make it your own—you're not bound by the strictures of one culture. And there's something about nature or any form of nature or draperies that has a form of abstraction that enables us to play. It's a way to work abstractly in a very realistic medium."

Erudite, thoughtful, and musically fluent, the artist welcomed the challenge of "translating" from a musical language into a visual equivalent.

"The challenge of adaptation is to find something in the visual structure that runs parallel to what's going on in the music to convey the emotional impact.

"Yet you must remain true to the work. I can't have a caption that explains an interior monologue. It has to be revealed as it is on the stage. You're translating drama. The creative challenge is to imbue a line with the lyricism of music."

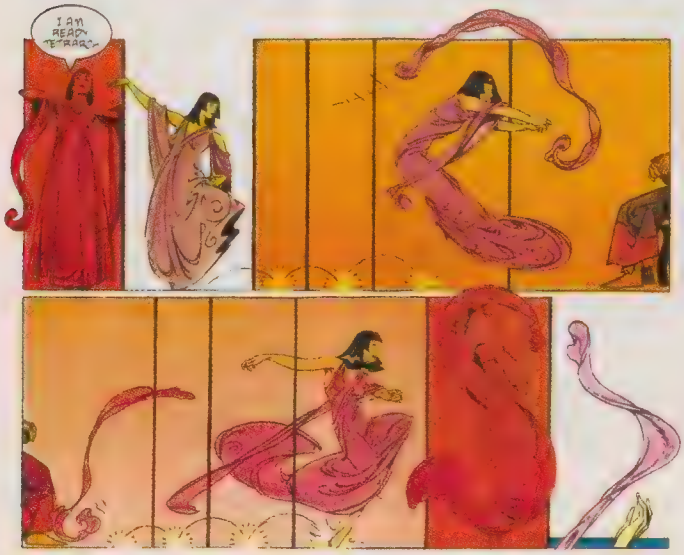
However, Russell doesn't intend his adaptations to compete with the original material. "I don't think that pictures will ever be so powerful as music. Music is so abstract and yet conveys such powerful emotion. You have to do the same thing in a completely different dramatic form and hope you have the same emotional high points while avoiding having a character just standing there singing the words.

"With *The Ring,* I listened to the music more often than any other opera. I needed to have it percolating in my head. I'm an amateur musician, and I played through the last orchestral movements to see how they lined up. Wagner has all his own leitmotif-ducks in a row, and attention must be paid."

As the artist explained in his "What Is An Adaptation" intro to *The Ring of the Nibelung,* "It can be the very abstraction of music that allows the visual artist greater latitude to call on all the visual devices of symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism in designing a storytelling structure."

One of his favorite images in *The Ring* is a wordless visual sequence: "Twelve drawings using their own interwoven set of visual motifs to illustrate an idea originally expressed in seven musical notes." The moment captured is that in which the god Voton conceives of the creation of the hero, his "superhero" grandson, Siegfried. Although the composer Richard Wagner indicated the moment through the introduction of a musical leitmotif that became identified with Siegfried, Russell had to find a visual equivalents.

"The solution," Russell wrote, "was to enter Voton's mind through the eye sacrificed for wisdom (inner vision). This leads to the interweaving of visual motifs already established in *Rhinegold* (the primal elements of water and light) with motifs yet to come in *The Valkyrie* (the sword and the tree.) The sequence ends with an exit, via the gleaming light of the sword, through Voton's good eye, the one which looks upon the outer world."



Russell's luscious color and exquisite linework have been applauded both by comic book fans and opera lovers. "I colored my own work for a number of years—a laborious process almost like old-fashioned animation stills—I would use frisket paper, panetone—several layers—and it all had to be cut out with exacto knives

"Now I work with a colorist, Lovern Kindzierski, who provides color via computer. The wonderful thing about computer coloring is, for example, in *The Ring,* if there's a mountainscape that was originally drawn in ink, the computer can read it in color."

Russell says that he thrives on deadlines and works at night, in binges, listening to opera and musicals, but he's obviously comfort-

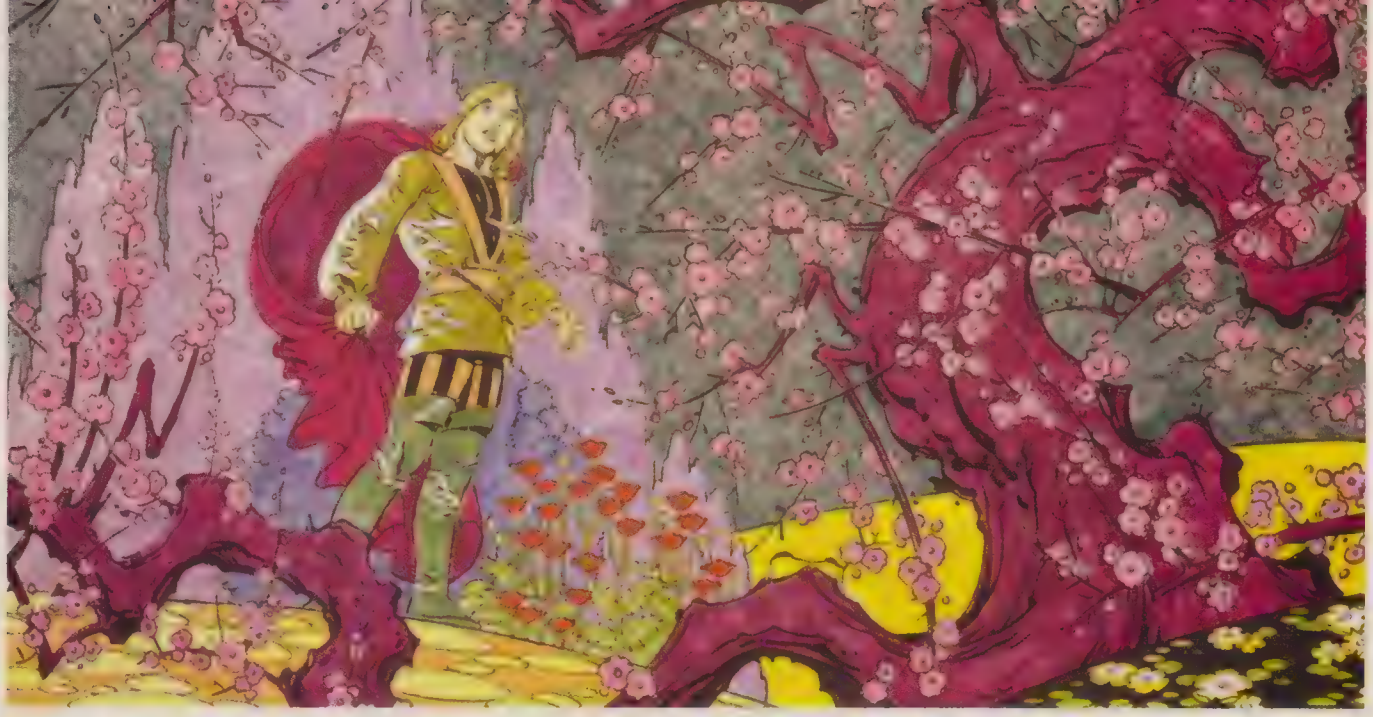
able staying with long-range projects. "It was 23 years after I said I was going to do *The Ring* that I started it and five years after that I finished it. I got a real sense of accomplishment creating a sense of structure for the adaptation of *The Ring*."

About the popular appeal of fantasy, he says, "I don't think it's a question of appeal. It's a way of seeing issues in your real life played out in fantasy. The slaying of the dragon equals, say, standing up to the boss. Those archetypes are in our life. They might be Dad, or the boss. That's why we respond to them. Bruno Bettelheim said it in "The Meaning and Use of Fairy Tales." All of those fairy tales have their counterpoints in real life. They dress up the emotional reality/hyper reality in a way that enables us to deal with something that might be very real, emotionally."

Russell had the opportunity to switch artistic gears for his adaptation of *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales* (NBM). "Wilde's stories remind me of the "Fractured Fairy Tales" that were on the Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon shows. They operate on two levels, for children and for adults. Back in the early nineties I was approached by NBM, and I wanted to do something in a more cartoony, animated style.

"I certainly look on the Oscar Wilde books as those that can be marketed to children. They weren't at first, but now that graphic novels go into children's departments, the *Oscar Wilde Fairy Tales* are going in because they sell. It used to be if a kid was reading a comic book, an English teacher despaired. Now teachers say, 'At least they're reading. It's not a computer game.'"

Russell's opera and later fairy tale adaptations have brought him acclaim and many awards including the Eisner, the Harvey, and the Parent's Choice. Since *Parsifal*, Russell has frequently collaborated

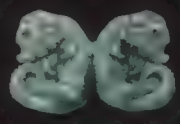


with his friend Patrick Mason, a singer with Bridge Records and voice teacher at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Russell's work was also seen in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: Endless Nights,* and he is currently collaborating with Gaiman on the graphic novel adaptation of the children's book *Coraline* for HarperCollins, scheduled for publication in 2008, when the animated movie of *Coraline* will appear in theaters.

"As soon as I finish *Coraline,* I'm doing a book for Little, Brown, a retelling of Greek heroes mythology, my first real children's books. Honestly, I prefer my writers dead." He laughs. "But I do play well with others.

"I'm always exquisitely aware of the original writers. I don't just treat it as raw material. I'm trying to do their story in this form but remain faithful." ❧

THE TAO OF CROCODILES



It's almost impossible to live in a very different culture without adopting its ways and beliefs. And, perhaps, the culture may choose to adopt you instead.

1 DREAMS HAVE POWER. Not the common dreams of flying or arriving naked at work—those are nothing more than the froth thrown up as the sleep-waves roll across the mind. No, the dreams that have power are the deep dreams, the unformed dreams. They move slowly in the deep of the mind, like great whales gliding under the waves. Dreams of this type sang to Bach and Mozart. Dreams like this spun webs of beauty to dazzle the eyes of Picasso and Van Gogh. Dreams like this poured out through the hands of Byron and Shelley. ■ But below these dreams, far below, where the mind turns black and cold and the pressure grasps and crushes in a smothering embrace, down there in the abyss swim the black dreams, the hungry dreams, the dreams of blood and bone. These are the dreams that whisper in the ears of the man next door as he stares unblinking at the ceiling and thinks of his daughter's flesh. These are the dreams that coil around the heart of the young mother living across from you as she stares

By Cuan Harvey ■ Illustration by Rob Johnson

at her ever-crying baby, her hands white-knuckled on the pillow she grips with both hands. ■ These are the dreams that goose-stepped across Europe. These are the dreams that piled skulls high in Cambodia. These are the dreams that wore white hoods and planted strange fruit. ■ Dreams are powerful things. And in Thailand, land of white elephants, sleeping giants, and mechanical swans, they are most powerful indeed. Here, the hungry dreams can reach out and swallow you whole.

2

This is what happened at the beginning.

My sister-in-law met a handsome, funny guy. He had a kind of devilish bad-boy charm, the kind of charm that's associated with leather jackets, motorcycles, and Marlboro cigarettes. One thing followed another, as they always do, and if we skip forward two years, we will find them living in a small two-room (if we count the bathroom) apartment above a busy, polluted intersection in one of the more grimy areas of Bangkok.

My sister-in-law sits on the bed. She is probing a large and spreading bruise on her face, which is darkening like an approaching storm cloud.

The handsome man—let's call him the lover, for want of a more precise word—is no mere wife-beater, however, and not entirely without a husband's instincts. As my sister-in-law winces and feels despair gnawing at her, the lover sits pillion on the back of a motorcycle weaving through traffic. He has a plan.

Now, let the camera of your mind freeze the lover in place. Pull back, so that you see the 150cc Yamaha with its electric blue body and masking tape wrapped round the handlebars. See the motorcycle in the middle of a metallic swirl of traffic, with the sun glinting painfully from the solar film on the windows of the cars. See the number 54 bus: long, single-deck, bright orange, an advertisement for toothpaste on its flank. Above the cars: a Gordian knot of electricity and telephone cables, braided and snarled and tangled.

Now pan to the left, along the length of the torrent of cars captured motionless beneath you. Move until you see a three-story shophouse with a strip of bright red paint running down the center. Large golden Chinese characters sprawl untidily on the red strip. Beneath them, the ground floor is guarded by iron bars that criss-cross the windows like prison wire.

This is the Yuan Chow Gold Shop and Pawnbrokers. Inside the shop, the owner, Yuan—a balding, plump man with shiny glasses—reads a battered copy of the *Thai Rath*. His son, the younger Yuan—a smudged copy of the father—leans his elbows on the smeared glass tops of the display cabinets. The cabinets are heavy with the buttery yellow of the pure gold favored by the Chinese and Thais.

Now, let the world move again. The cars roar past the windows. Motorcycles buzz like hornets on amphetamines. The ancient air-conditioner creaks and mutters. Yuan pokes the pages of the *Thai Rath* with a righteous finger and shakes his head and mutters to himself.

If you look hard enough at someone in a dream, you can see right into their head, see their thoughts crawling through red tunnels of flesh.

The door bursts open. The small bell above it jangles furiously. Yuan Chow looks up. He sees two men wearing black ski masks. One has a pistol; the other carries a shotgun.

At first, Yuan Chow does not understand what he sees. His brain freezes with shock, and all he feels is indignation. He stands up and draws breath to shout. The stool he has been sitting on topples backward.

The lover sees Yuan's sudden movement. The perception bypasses his rational brain and scoots directly to the adrenaline-crazed reptile brain. The reptile-brain says: pull the trigger.

Both barrels of the shotgun go off with a roar. One hundred and thirteen grams of lead traveling at two hundred and seventeen meters per second exit the barrels of the shotgun and then very shortly afterward enter the chest of Yuan Chow. Soon after that, approximately one third of them exit Yuan Chow's back and punch into the wall behind him.

Yuan Chow falls over. He's dead.

The younger Yuan has time to half-turn to look at the final ruin of his father before the pistol goes off. The bullet enters his head just above his temple, killing him instantly.

The lover only now realizes what he has done. He is suddenly very angry at the stupidity of Yuan Chow. He pulls off his ski mask, leans over the counter, and shouts abuse.

Yuan Chow, of course, does not respond.

The lover and his companion then begin looting. The crystalline tinkles of fracturing glass mingle almost musically with the grunting bass counterpoints of the men. The lover and his companion do not see the very fine wires that now lay snapped among the shards and knives of broken glass.

Now, let your mind's eye pan over the display cabinets to where Yuan Chow sat only a few moments ago. Above the fleshly portion of Yuan Chow's life, fixed to the metal back of the display cabinet is a small gray box. On the front of the box, a red light blinks steadily.

Yuan Chow's newly instilled alarm system—monitored continually by the police of the Thonburi district. For this privilege, Yuan pays exactly ten thousand baht a month—stuffed into a manila envelope and handed to the district chief on the second Thursday of every month.

Thailand's police may appear incompetent, but appearances are slippery things, and not to be trusted. The Thai police are quite efficient enough—when they choose to be. And in cases where a gold shop owner and pawnbroker pays ten thousand baht a month, they can be very efficient indeed. After all, reputations are fragile things.

Consequently, by the time the lover and his companion finish their frenzy of one-sided consumerism, three policemen are running toward the gold shop from the police-box one hundred yards away at the Wong Wien Yai intersection. They are twenty yards from the door when it bangs shut behind the lover.

The lover's companion sees the policemen and turns to run. The lover, on the other hand, is made of sterner stuff. He raises his shotgun and pulls the trigger. The hammers click home on already-expended cartridges.

The first policeman—a man who for years has dreamed of this exact situation—pulls his gun, aims carefully, and fires twice. The first bullet punches clean through the lover's lung, narrowly missing the ribs. The second, arriving only moments after the first, strikes the lover fifteen centimeters above point of impact of the first. A slug of lead weighing five point eight three grams blows through the skin and muscle of the chest wall and rips clean through the lover's heart before exiting from his back in a welter of blood and bone fragments from one of his ribs.

The lover feels an immense pressure in his chest. He falls over. He opens his mouth, but darkness rushes in to fill it. He cannot breathe and he watches in terror as the sky darkens first to red and then, all too rapidly, to black.

He dies.

3

The first I heard of the sexual crocodile was during the Thai New Year celebration—Songkhran, April 2005. My wife and I had driven to her village in the northeast of the country, a ten-hour journey from our home on the outskirts of Bangkok. Songkhran is the Thai equivalent of Thanksgiving—it's the time when families converge and swap lies. Songkhran takes place in the height of the hot season in Thailand, and at midday, a kind of breathless hush comes over the dry hills and dusty roads. It's a silence born of a heat that is inescapable and omnipresent.

I was sprawled in the hammock, a ratty black and gray string affair, suspended between two jackfruit trees. Just after midday, the sun pressed down on me through the leaves of the trees overhead. The air felt heavy and the only real sound from outside the house came from the churring buzz of the crickets.

My wife and her sisters sat round a drift of plates filled with the detritus of breakfast—glutinous rice, raw beef in tiny cubes swimming in its own blood, chopped papaya salad with fermented fish and chili, and assorted limp vegetables. They discussed dreams, trying to predict the lottery numbers in the next draw.

Then, in a lull in the conversation, my sister-in-law (sister number three of six) spoke about the dream she had had the night before.

She had been in bed in her room in Bangkok, naked. The door to the balcony stood open, and she could see the night sky outside. A scratching noise of nails and claws came through the open door. Then a crocodile poked its head round the door frame and looked at her.

As happens in dreams, she couldn't move, and she watched the crocodile belly-walk its way into the apartment and over to the bed. The crocodile flowed up onto the bed, and then, so my sister-in-law said, crawled up toward her, yellow eyes blazing like lamps and shooting out golden beams of light.

Often in dreams, we know things that we couldn't know in real life. It's as if we have dream-telepathy, or dream-clairvoyance. Why this is, I couldn't say, but it's still true. If you look hard enough at someone in a dream, you can see right into their head, see their thoughts crawling through red tunnels of flesh.

So despite the crocodile's silence (crocodile jaws are not meant for speaking), my sister-in-law knew what the reptile wanted: sex.

When I see it written down like this, it looks ridiculous. Crocodiles are predators, silent killers of fish and wild pigs. They're all teeth and scales and cold prehistoric cunning.

But this was a dream-crocodile, and dreams are not bound by the barren strictures of logic and rationality. Dreams are like the Tao: the formless Form, the imageless Image. Try to grasp them, and they'll flow through your fingers like water. They must be apprehended, not analyzed. If a dream crocodile desires sex, then it desires sex. There's no point in asking why—it just does.

That first night the crocodile simply flowed its way toward her and then stared down at her, illuminating her with the yellow beams of light from its eyes. She could smell the sex-drive coming off it in waves, but it made no further move, just swayed and weaved above her like a drugged snake.

And then she woke up.

That was the first I heard of the sexual crocodile. I wish it had been the last.

4 Thais are great believers in ghosts. Scratch a Thai, and under the surface coating of Buddhism, you'll find an animist. Ghosts and spirits are everywhere.

But most especially dangerous and powerful are the Phii Tai Hong. These are the ghosts of people who have died sudden or violent deaths. The speed of their death surprises them—no slipping quietly into the dark for these people. They have no time to make peace or to let go of their desires. Their lusts and cravings then tie them to our world and prevent them from being reborn. As time passes, their jealousy of the living warps them, twisting them into malevolence and darkness.

5 For a few months, I heard nothing more about the dream-crocodile. My work at the school picked up, and I saw little of my relatives, including my sister-in-law. Time passed, and the breath-stealing heat of the hot season gave way to the first storms of the rainy season.

The rainy season in Thailand arrives with violence, as if the last remnants of the hot season must be smashed aside. The storms flicker on the horizon during the morning, then as afternoon approaches, they rush forward, darkening the sky to an unnatural twilight. Lightning stabs down and thunder cracks and rumbles. The rain pours down in a sheet, individual droplets lost in the deluge. Across Bangkok, the power flickers, then gives way under the uneven onslaught. Sometimes this happens at night, leaving you trapped in a blackness of thundering rain and roaring winds.

It was on a day like this that I came home to the small apartment I shared with my wife to find my sister-in-law in tears, and my wife patting her arm ineffectually. My sister-in-law looked faded and washed out. Her skin had a grayish tinge to it, as if underneath lay nothing but cold ash.

I tried to hide my surprise, but such a change was not to be hidden or glossed over. I saw my mingled shock and fascination and revulsion reflected in her eyes. Understandably, this produced another flood of tears, a squall to match the storm hurling down rain outside.

I was banished to the bedroom.

An hour or so later, my wife came into the room. The last faint dribblings of sunlight had gone by this time, and the rain hissed down in darkness outside. Through the open door, I could see my sister-in-law sleeping on our couch, curled up like a brittle child with her hands tucked under her head.

My wife told me that my sister-in-law had been dreaming of the crocodile. At first, the dreams came perhaps once a week, but soon they crowded together and came faster and faster. With each recurrence, the dreams became more powerful and intense.

Sometimes, when you see people, you feel that one push would be enough to send them spinning away like dandelion seeds. They appear light and insubstantial, so much so that it is easy to ignore them. You can simply look straight through as if they were not there at all. But other people demand attention. They are solid, real. They draw the eye like a magnet draws iron. Somehow they are more there than other people.

The crocodile was becoming more there each time my sister-in-law had the dream. And, like a black hole distorts space, drawing light into it by bending reality, the crocodile's weight, its thereness, was beginning to warp the dream-space around it. Now when my sister-in-law had the dream, she was no longer in her own apartment. Now, when she watched the crocodile crawl in from the balcony, she watched from an unmade bed in a small two-bedroom apartment. Sylvester Stallone as he appeared in *Cobra*—all leather, shades, and guns—sneered down from the opposite wall.

It was with a sense of inevitability I recognized the description of the apartment my sister-in-law had shared with the lover.

6 **mor phii /maw pee/**
n. (lit. doctor ghost) sorcerer, witch doctor, magician, black magician, voodoo doctor, exorcist.

7 When we took my sister-in-law to the ghost-doctor, the rainy season was really getting into its stride. Every afternoon, great sheets of rain hammered down on the main road outside our apartment building. Within minutes, black, swirling, ankle-deep water covered the road. The drains backed up and fouled the area with a thick stench. By the time an hour had passed, the water washed up over the two-foot high sidewalk and into the shophouses lining the road.

We set off just before this daily inundation, and by the time we arrived at the apartment building where the ghost-doctor lived, the taxi plowed through the water like some kind of amphibious assault vehicle. The storm clouds were black and lowering above us. They blocked out most of the sunlight, and the whole city was plunged into a deep gloom.

The ghost-doctor lived on the very top floor of a cheaply built apartment building. The construction firm had skimped on the ratio of sand to cement, and now cracks spider-webbed their way up the gray-streaked sides of the building. Small chunks of concrete had fallen from the balconies of the tiny apartments, leaving dark gray pits like acne scars. Above and behind it, the clouds boiled and swirled, and rain blurred the building's outline.

It all started to go wrong with The Look.

As we walked into the ghost-doctor's apartment, my wife supporting her sister on her arm, I got The Look from the ghost-doctor. The Look is something all Westerners in the East become familiar with, if they stay long enough. It's a sideways glance, a momentary flicker of the eyebrows, a miniscule tightening of the mouth. It's just enough to remind you that you are not in your element, you do not belong, you are other.

The irritation that The Look causes does not diminish with time. Rather the opposite, in fact. The longer a Westerner stays in the East, the more The Look begins to grate. It gets under the skin, it chafes and itches. And the reason why? It reminds you, never ever, no matter what you do, no matter how well you speak Thai, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Lao, Khmer, or Malay (because The Look is everywhere), you will never fit in. You will always be different.

And that knowledge burns.

So when I got The Look from the ghost-doctor, the curl of anger inside me—given me by the floods and the mosquitoes and the stink of the backed-up drains—sparked into sullen life. I wish with all my heart that it hadn't.

8 My memory of the thirty-seven minutes I spent in the ghost-doctor's apartment is probably not what actually happened. I have spent so much time working over the

events that the memories have become loose and scratched from overuse.

The ghost-doctor listened as my wife explained what had been happening. As she spoke, he clasped his hands together and stared up at the ceiling. When she had finished, he nodded gravely and launched into a long-winded explanation.

The content of what he said, stripped of the flowery Thai peppered with unnecessary Sanskrit and Pali, was as follows: The lover's violent death had left him a Phii Tai Hong. Despite the beatings and the abuse, he truly loved my sister-in-law, and so wanted to live with her again. He did not mean to hurt her, but his very presence was slowly pulling my sister-in-law into the ghost world, and if we did not stop him, eventually she would die. However, he, the ghost-doctor could help. He could cut the threads holding the spirit to the world and send it off to its next life.

My wife and sister-in-law nodded as the ghost-doctor spoke. My sister-in-law—gray and bony like a charcoal sketch—sniffled and whispered to my wife that it was true, he had really loved her.

The exorcism ceremony started with the ghost-doctor lighting fat yellow candles and placing them in a line on the coffee table in between the couch and the chair he sat on. When the candles burned steadily, he turned off the lights, leaving us sitting in darkness illuminated only by the weak, flickering glow of the candles. The last element before the ceremony began was the spirit-thread, a white thread that we had to wind round our hands in a circle.

I had seen the spirit-thread before at blessings, where monks wound the thread round the person or object or building they wanted to bless before they began their chanting. The spirit-thread tied ghosts and spirits in place. It acted like a barrier to evil influences. At least, that was what my wife had told me.

I like to think I have a fairly open mind. I'm willing to consider a lot of things that maybe others wouldn't, but I just couldn't find it in myself to take this thread seriously. It was the cheapest, lightest cotton string you could find. If someone tells me a gold-plated dagger has magical powers, I'm going to handle it very carefully. After all, even if it doesn't have magical powers, it's still plated with gold.

But this was string. Just ordinary string. How seriously would you take it?

So the ghost-doctor unspooled the string and passed it round the circle. We each clasped our hands together in a *wai*, and pressed the string between them.

The ghost doctor began chanting in Pali, and the ceremony started. The candles flickered. Driblets of wax ran down them and formed peculiar shapes. The rain lashed at the windows, driven hard against them by the wind, now whooping in hard gusts against the building.

There is no "why" in dreams. DREAMS SIMPLY ARE. They have no reason; they're no part of our clockwork reality.

Time crawled past. The chanting seemed to fill the whole apartment, sonorous and carrying and resonant. It had the same timber that a didgeridoo has, the kind of deep vibrating buzz that you can feel in your belly.

My anger and boredom slowly mounted. My legs ached from sitting in one position for so long, and the small of my back sang me a nasty little song composed of twitches and flashes of pain. I tried shifting position to assuage it, but my wife opened one eye and hissed at me to stay still.

And then my knee began to ache. As the minutes passed, the ache swelled. It went rapidly from an irritation to a sharp pain that felt alternately hot and cold. I moved slightly and almost yelled out loud. I could feel something grinding in my joint, scraping and scratching as if ground glass or sand had worked its way in. I drew in a sharp breath and shifted slightly. My wife glared at me from one eye, but doctor opened his eyes and, still chanting, raised both eyebrows and gave me The Look, then turned his head away so he wouldn't have to look at me.

That did it for me. All the irritation and compressed anger I had within me exploded out. I half-expected to hear a whoof, like the sound you get when you throw a match on gasoline.

I lurched to my feet, let the thread fall to the ground, and pointed a trembling finger at the ghost-doctor. I drew breath to yell at him. The thread touched the floor.

And then it happened.

The darkness in the room suddenly pressed down and the air thickened and curdled. It was as if the room had suddenly been transported to the bottom of the ocean, and now the dark water pushed on the room, trying to squeeze it down into nothingness. The candle flames froze. The ghost-doctor opened his eyes wide.

And then something black hit the windows, which broke apart in a shower of sharp-edged fragments. The candles blew out and the room was plunged into sudden thick darkness. The wind howled and rain spattered my face.

Something knocked into me, and I fell over backward. The ghost-doctor yelled once. There was a grunt, a hiss, then a slow exhalation, followed by the sound of something heavy falling to the floor. Glass crunched. Then the only sound was my wife's sobbing.

When I stumbled over to the light switch and flicked it, the fluorescent revealed a scene that I will not forget. The ghost-doctor lay on his back staring at the ceiling with wide-open eyes. His mouth worked silently, and a thin clear dribble of saliva glistened as it hung from the corner of his mouth.

On the other side of the low table, my wife cradled the head of my sister-in-law, but to no avail. My sister-in-law was already dead.

9.

There's not much left to say now. What follows is bitter to me, it's sharp-toothed and hungry, and I can't bear to think of it for long.

I thought my sister-in-law's death would end it. I thought when the lover's ghost (because I now believed—you bet your eyes I did) had dragged my sister-in-law off, then life would return to what might eventually pass for normal.

I thought wrong.

It didn't start again until after the funeral. Two weeks after my sister-in-law had been cremated, my wife had a dream. I don't think I need to tell you what it was.

Why? I hear you ask. The lover dragged my sister-in-law into the dark with him—why would he come back again?

Why? I told you earlier there is no "why" in dreams. Dreams simply are. They have no reason; they're no part of our clockwork reality.

With my sister-in-law, it took months. With my wife, it was much faster. Three weeks after the first of the dreams, she was dead.

My wife is dead. It looks so matter-of-fact when it's written down, almost unimportant, a routine matter, a fact.

What I want to say is that my life has been scooped out and left empty. I want to convey to you the weight that time has suddenly acquired—how it sits heavy on my chest. I want you to understand that meaning and subtlety have been stripped from me, leaving me a cipher, a symbol with no referent.

But I cannot, and so I will simply repeat: my wife is dead.

10.

This story has no end. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it has not yet ended. I hope it will end with me, although I fear that it will not. Dreams and ghosts are strange things, and the dark dreams will swim on uncaring after all of man has turned to dust.

You know the rest by now, I'm sure. The crocodile, be it dream or ghost, took my sister-in-law, then my wife. It blasted the mind of the ghost-doctor, leaving him a dribbling shell, and now it has come back for me.

Last night was the first, and already it had dragged me to the room above the intersection with the unmade bed and the poster of Stallone sneering down at me. Although last night, the man in the poster no longer resembled Stallone. His face was fleshy and indistinct, but his teeth were very sharp and clear. ❧

the rope

Continued from page 51

pulsing stream through a hose, which she could feel pushing upward or drawn upward, urging, rhythmic, hollow, hungry.

To herself she said, "What will it be like to sail the sky forever? To receive praise and adoration with the sun, sung along by horologues? I will climb the stays of the sun god's boat, dance upon his carapace, balance upon his sphere, juggle before his eye, guide all seventy-two of his sacred forms upon otherworldly roads."

This decided, she turned away from the dust, away from the earth, away from unrest and dissatisfaction, to climb aloft to what was above, boat or beetle, eye or orb. What was above, was not these. It was bloated and glistening, its ruddy surface, mottled and veined, stretching and pulsing, beating faster and faster, in a familiar rhythm O God O God. To it, the rope, an artery. It smelled of boy, of flesh, of blood, of great hunger.

From below, a joyous ululation, overwhelming, and their hearts beating faster and faster, swelling in hope and anticipation O God O God.

She knew their desires. She knew what would sate them. So had the boy. Up! Up! Up, you pretty monkey! O God! O God!

Iánheh uncurled her fingers.

"O GOD! O GOD! WHAT A BLESSED GIRL! O GOD! O God! What a virtuous girl! O God! O God! Fill our hearts with your presence! O God! O God!" Until their joyful ululation changed its pitch and into silence. Then, after a moment, bitter sighs among them. Passers-by consoled the little khedeev with a coin or two. They might have given more, they said, but after all, the girl had only fallen.

IÁNHEH TÁ-HEYBESI AWOKE ON A rooftop, knowing that one arm was broken and that a little boy was stripping the copper bracelet from her wrist. Then he took her *qafiyeh*, her tunic, and her trousers. Iánheh huddled naked in the shadow of a pigeon tower until nightfall, then crept away from Qáriyá in stolen clothes.

She stowed away among goats in a crowded livestock car to Renáriyá, thence limped barefoot home to Noofr. Her father the vaccinator had returned, as did, sometime later, the unpopular khedeev. Her father contracted for a new house and meanwhile Iánheh's arm mended. Foreigners came again, in ways Iánheh could never have anticipated. She resumed her customary employment as dragoman, in which she had any number of interesting encounters, none of which have much to do with the present tale.

However, during these she occasionally met the little khedeev again. He had this rope-climbing boy one time, that rope-climbing boy another. Iánheh never stopped to observe them perform tricks that she could neither have imagined nor attempted, and she cautioned her *sáyeeds* to do likewise. But the little khedeev had become quite famous. Many people gathered about him and his rope and his boy, asking, "Will God take the boy? O God! O God!"

Until one day people realized that now all of the boys disappeared at the end of the rope. Then, when the little khedeev put the embouchure of the ivory horn to his lips and sounded his perfect notes and the rope rose from the basket into the sky and the boy swarbled up and up and up, they said, "O we've seen the likes of this so many times before! This boy will dangle by his toes and snare a pigeon flying in midair before he disappears, just like the last one. It is nothing special. God takes them all the time. It is nothing at all."

Iánheh tá-Heybesi passed them by, muttering only, "It is not God. It is not God." Of course, no one listened. And so she abandoned them all, to whatever new tricks the old man would invent for that which waited at both ends of the rope.❧

stephanie

Continued from page 55

chased her away. Would I have really been better off working in my Dad's video store for the rest of my life, marrying the best woman I could find in a town that small, letting a couple of kids put my dreams on hold? Maybe. Probably not. But it doesn't make today any easier to live with.

My face is wet and I realize I'm crying. No one to be cool for, so I let them come. The tears, the heaving sobs, all building toward the resignation I'll need to pull the trigger.

Somewhere, "Stephanie Shrugs" is playing on the radio.

Then I feel her arms wrap around my bare shoulders, her kiss on the back of my neck. I smell berries and second chances. No way I can hold back the tears now. My whole body shakes, and I can't even face her.

We sit there for an hour, silent. Contemplating one another. Then Stephanie stands and I look up at her for the first time. I'm older than she is now. She's wearing jeans and a loose-fitting Get Up Kids tee-shirt, tucked in. I can't help but smile.

She doesn't speak, but she offers me her hand.

I take it without hesitating, and pray to God she's going to change my life one last time.

Garageland—November 2006

It's easy to find Garageland again, when your muse leads the way.

Different garage, same concept. I even have an ugly old couch. Of course, I'm a little more high-tech now. This garage isn't just a place to jam, it's my recording studio, soundproofed to the max and the only place in the world I want to be.

I made a deal with this indie record label out of California. Nothing major; I'm through with all that success bullshit. Just someone to get my music into the hands of whoever wants to listen. I might sell one copy, I might sell 100,000. Either way I'll be happy. The pay's shit, but who needs money when you've got cult status? Besides, residuals keep me in CDs and cigarettes.

I'm remixing this bluesy track I've been working on for weeks when I see Stephanie sitting on my couch.

"You look better than you did last time I saw you," she says, and I can tell by the look in her eyes that she's not just blowing smoke up my ass.

"Thanks. You look pretty much the same."

"The curse of long life," she says, smiling, and I realize she's revealed more about her true nature in that sentence than in every other conversation we've ever had.

She pats the couch next to her and I take a seat.

"Thanks," I say.

"For what?"

"Bringing me here."

"It's not something you need to thank me for. It's what I do. Why I was sent here in the first place."

I get the sense that Stephanie is on the brink of spilling all the answers I've been waiting for since I was a kid. Just a little urging and I'll understand Stephanie's reason for being; why she delivers her mixed blessings. Why she chose me. But I understand myself well enough now to know the mystery is what I'm really in love with.

"You just here to check on me, or do you have some nugget of wisdom you've been saving? Maybe a stock tip?"

She laughs. "You're in a good place now."

"The best place. Guess you won't be staying long?"

"I can hang around for a while if you need me to."

I shake my head. "Go change somebody's life."

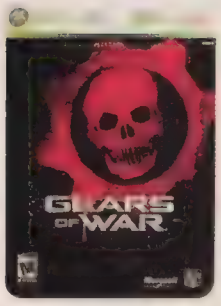
I realize it's very possible I'm seeing Stephanie for the last time. Before she can disappear, I kiss her, then I ask the one question I can't stand to leave unanswered.

"Do you love me?"

Stephanie shrugs, and that's good enough for me. ❧

By Eric T. Baker

WoW's expansion, *Burning Crusade,* is well worth the two-year wait.



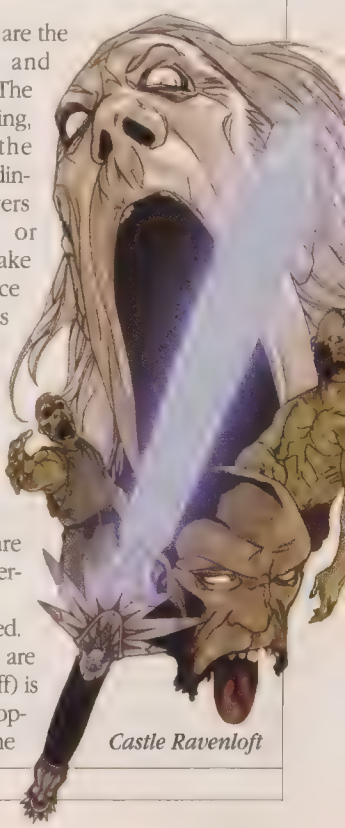
If you have a friend, family member, or significant other who doesn't play video games (except maybe solitaire or online poker), but has heard of something called "MMOs," that is probably the fault of Blizzard Entertainment's breakthrough massive multiplayer online role-playing game hit, ***World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade.*** Online RPGs are pretty much as old as computer networking, but *WoW* is the first such game to push—on the back of its quality, depth, and polish—past its gaming niche and into the popular consciousness. When the game was parodied on Comedy Central's *South Park* this season, the 3.5 million people who watched were only about half the number who play the game itself.

When *WoW* launched in November of 2004, there was talk from Blizzard that they would be expanding the basic game once a year. As the game became more and more popular, the timetable for expansion was moved back, and moved back, and then moved back some more. In the end, it has taken more than two years to get the first expansion of the game, *The Burning Crusade,* out the door. It contains two new player races and one new crafting class, but no new character classes. It does contain new zones, new quests, and new items. It raises the level cap to 70 and it adds flying mounts.

ABOVE: Neverwinter Nights 2 *from Obsidian Entertainment can be played solo or it can be played cooperatively via LAN or Internet.*

The two factions in *WoW* are the Alliance and the Horde, and each side gets a new race. The Alliance gets the crystal-crafting, satyrical Draenei, and the Horde gets the buxom, paladin-enabled Blood Elves. Players (whether new, current, or returning) will be able to make new characters of either race and play those characters through 20 levels of new content before they will be merged into the regular, old content of the game world. There is more new content for playing while getting characters from Level 60 to Level 70, although many of the rewards for these new solo quests are the items and equipment that players have been laboriously earning via 40 player-instanced dungeons over the past two years.

The only flaw in the *The Burning Crusade* is the time it has taken to get it released. The two new races are both interesting and distinctive, and their starting zones are on par with those of the previous races. The high-level content (the 60 to 70 stuff) is also on par with the content that gets the players to that point, and the new drop-in dungeons, which take far fewer players to tackle, are a welcome addition. The



Castle Ravenloft

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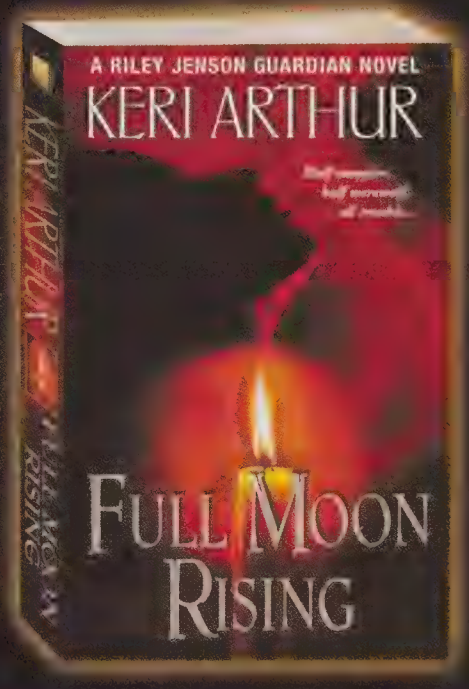

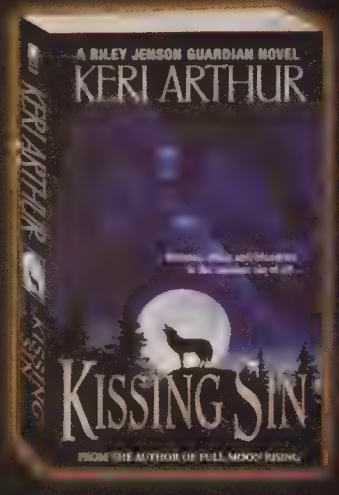

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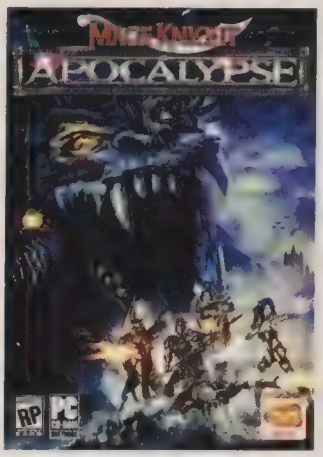
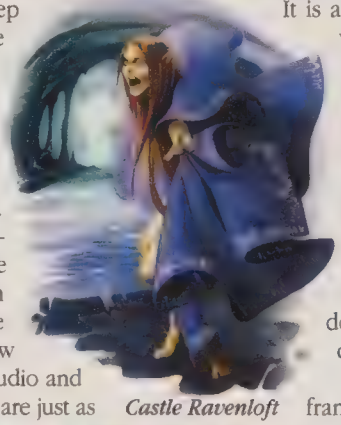


people who tried *WoW* but didn't stick with it aren't going to have their minds changed by *BC*, but the legions of people who love the game will be happy to have more to do.

A completely different sort of gaming experience is provided by ***Gears of War***, by Epic Games and from Microsoft for the Xbox 360. *GoW* is a classic first-person shooter in look and plot, but it is innovative in gameplay. In classic shooter gameplay, the best strategy for the player is to keep moving because, as in Hollywood action movies, a hero in motion (particularly side to side) is unhitable. FPS culture early on coined the term "circle-strafe" to describe the tactic of sliding around enemies in a circle while keeping the character's gun aimed inward at them and blazing away.

GoW encourages players to find cover instead of moving. The game uses the green X button to let players guide their character, SWAT team member-like, from cover to cover, jumping across doorways, rolling from concrete block to concrete block, always with the character's head down. The players can keep their characters running around in the open, but this nearly always results in a swift death. Better is crouching behind cover, popping up to shoot enemies who are foolish enough to move in the open, and ducking back whenever the character starts taking hits. This strategy will carry the player through the entire game.

The backstory of *GoW* has to do with an attack on humanity by an alien race that burrows up from underground and the wreck that was made of the world fighting them. As in most FPSs, the story doesn't really matter, beyond giving the character something to fight toward and explaining why more enemies keep jumping up out of these holes in the ground. What is important in an FPS are the guns, and the guns in *GoW* are excellent. They are as massive as the characters, and they have a good "heft" both in their animations and in the way the controller reacts to them being fired. The best is the "Lancer" that has a chainsaw bayonet on the end. The audio and animation on the chainsaw are just as satisfying as a player would hope.



Castle Ravenloft

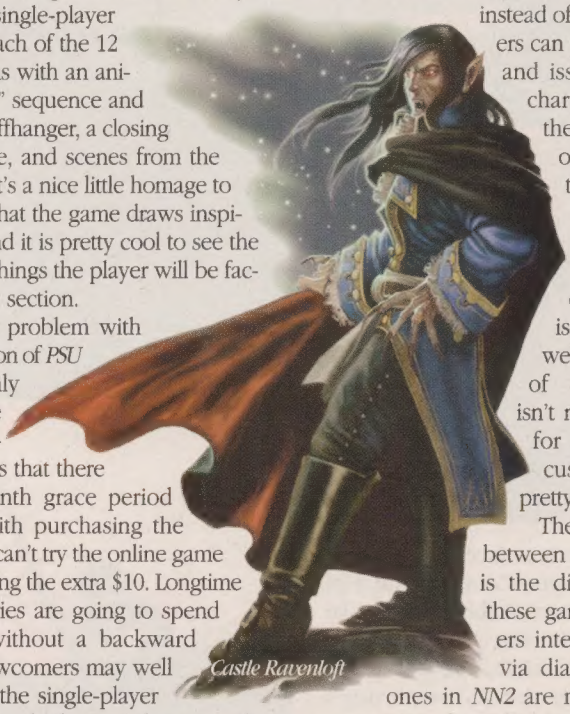
The solo version of *GoW* has the player leading a team of three other soldiers. They are of more use as distractions than for help in killing, so the greatest fun of *GoW* comes in the cooperative play, either split screen or over the Internet. It is possible to do the entire single-player game cooperatively. There is also four-on-four death matching, which is particularly fun because the arrangement of the maps lets the characters use their bayonets more than in the campaign game. Still, solo, coop, or death match, *GoW* is a shooting experience that is both familiar and yet new and exciting.

Despite its name, ***Phantasy Star Universe*** is not a fantasy RPG like *The Burning Crusade*, although some of the characters do have pointy ears and swing swords. *PSU* is not a science fiction shooter like *Gears of War*, although it is set at least partially in space. It is available on the Xbox 360 (as well as the PC and the PS2), and you can team up with other players online to fight cooperatively. What *PSU* is, in fact, is a Japanese RPG that has two modes of gameplay. One is the single-player story, and the other is the online version where players can meet up with other players to do instanced missions and to craft and to buy and sell gear.

An old (in video game terms) franchise, *Phantasy Star* started out as a series of turn-based, single-player RPGs from SEGA in 1988. It became the first console-based online RPG in 2000, and indeed remained the only such game until *Final Fantasy XI* launched on the PS2 in 2004. So the game has a lot of history, but luckily players don't have to know it to enjoy this version.

For the offline, single-player game, players take the role of Ethan Waber. He's a cadet on a space station when it is attacked by "The Seed." Separated from his sister, he has to battle his way through various monsters and ene-

mies to find and rescue her. Along the way he levels, gains new weapons, teams up with and loses various NPCs in his party, and even does some crafting and specialization. A very cute touch to the single-player game is that each of the 12 chapters begins with an animated "credits" sequence and ends with a cliffhanger, a closing "credits" movie, and scenes from the next chapter. It's a nice little homage to all the anime that the game draws inspiration from, and it is pretty cool to see the scenes of the things the player will be facing in the next section.


Castle Ravenloft

The biggest problem with the online portion of *PSU* is the monthly fee, and the biggest problem with that is that there is no one-month grace period that comes with purchasing the game. Players can't try the online game without spending the extra $10. Longtime fans of the series are going to spend that money without a backward glance, but newcomers may well want to finish the single-player game first, by which time they may have decided they've had enough of *PSU*'s combat. This is a shame because the character customization and the crafting and particularly the multiplayer combat are a lot of fun.

Of the many games that are competing for RPG players this winter, ***Neverwinter Nights 2***, by Obsidian Entertainment and from Atari for the PC, is easily the best of the non-MMO ones. It can be played solo, with NPCs filling the video game format, but a tremendous number of the races, classes, prestige classes, skills, feats, spells, items, and mechanics have carried over. The game happens in real time instead of turns, but the players can pause it at any time and issue orders to their character. In addition, they can take control of nearly anyone in their party (some characters join for specific quests and aren't fully controllable) and issue them orders as well. Normally this sort of micromanagement isn't necessary as the AI for the NPCs is very customizable and pretty smart.

The biggest difference between *NN2* and *BC* or *PSU* is the dialog trees. All of these games have the players interacting with NPCs via dialog trees, but the ones in *NN2* are much longer, have many more branches, and the choices the player makes on them actually affect the way the game comes out—not just specifics of what can happen next in the plot, but also how the characters in the player's party treat the main character and what they will do to and for him as the game goes on. For anyone who likes fantasy settings and who likes computer role-playing, *NN2* is a game that should not be missed.

WoW: Burning Crusade

out the player's party, or it can be played cooperatively via LAN or Internet. Both ways players can do the long, multifaceted story, and they can also download adventures created by other players. The tools for making these adventures are bundled with the basic game, and if *NN2* is even half as popular as *NN1* was, there will be hundreds of these adventures. Plus there is no monthly fee for accessing the Internet/multiplayer parts of the game.

For its gameplay, *NN2* is based on the 3.5 version of the paper-and-dice *Dungeons & Dragons* game. There are some changes to fit

Speaking of *D&D*, another one of its classic adventures has been re-released and updated for the latest incarnation of the system. ***Expedition to Castle Ravenloft*** is a campaign-length adventure based on the original by Tracy and Laura Hickman. This time around it is a 222-page hardcover book with full-color pages and illustrations, chock full of maps and playing aids. Intended for characters that start out the campaign at Level 6, the book contains so much to do that the characters are likely to be Level 10 by the time it is over.

Like the original, the players' characters in

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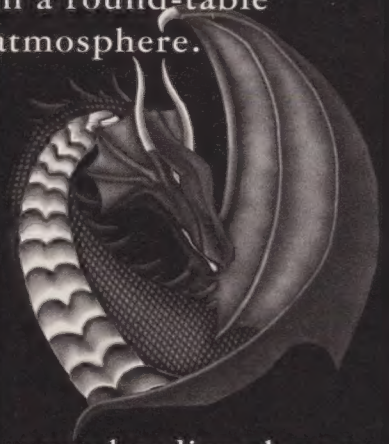

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Neverwinter Nights 2

Neverwinter Nights 2

EtCR travel to Barovia to face off against its ancient, undead ruler, Count Strahd von Zarovich. The authors of this version take great pains to retain the danger and the atmosphere of the original adventure. In particular, they have devoted seven pages to the tarot reading that the characters each receive early in the adventure so that the DM can, using real tarot cards or even regular playing cards, do readings that will actually impact what goes on in the rest of the adventure.

The biggest change in this version, beside the added length, is the layout. This book uses a "Tactic Encounter Format," which means that encounters and locations are written up in order in the book, but then refer to a section of two-page spreads at the end of each chapter. Each spread contains all that is required to run that encounter: a map, stats for the monsters, descriptions of them and their tactics, and any other details that the DM needs for the scene. The utility of these layouts cannot be overstated. Overall this is a very useful, very inventive campaign that will provide a gaming group with many nights of chills.

Then there is ***Mage Knight Apocalypse,*** by and from Bandai Namco Games for the PC, based on the collectible miniatures game from Wizkids. The game models the characters and the background of the miniatures game, but not the gameplay in the way that *NN2* models *D&D*. It has more in common with the carnage of *GoW*, although it is a third-person, click and kill action game instead of a shooter. Players choose from one of five characters to start, but each chapter of the game adds another character to the player's party, so that no matter which character the player chooses, they are all onboard by the end.

Phantasy Star Universe

While the online, multiplayer version of *MKA* can be entertaining, the single-player version really suffers from bad AI for the NPCs in the player's party. The players can only control the character they choose at the beginning; the computer runs the others. The computer does a fair job of getting the characters to fight, but it is terrible at path finding. All too often, the characters end up trapped around corners and won't follow the main characters even when they have an apparently clear line to them. This is a frustrating problem in what otherwise would be a balanced and playable kill fest. ❧

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